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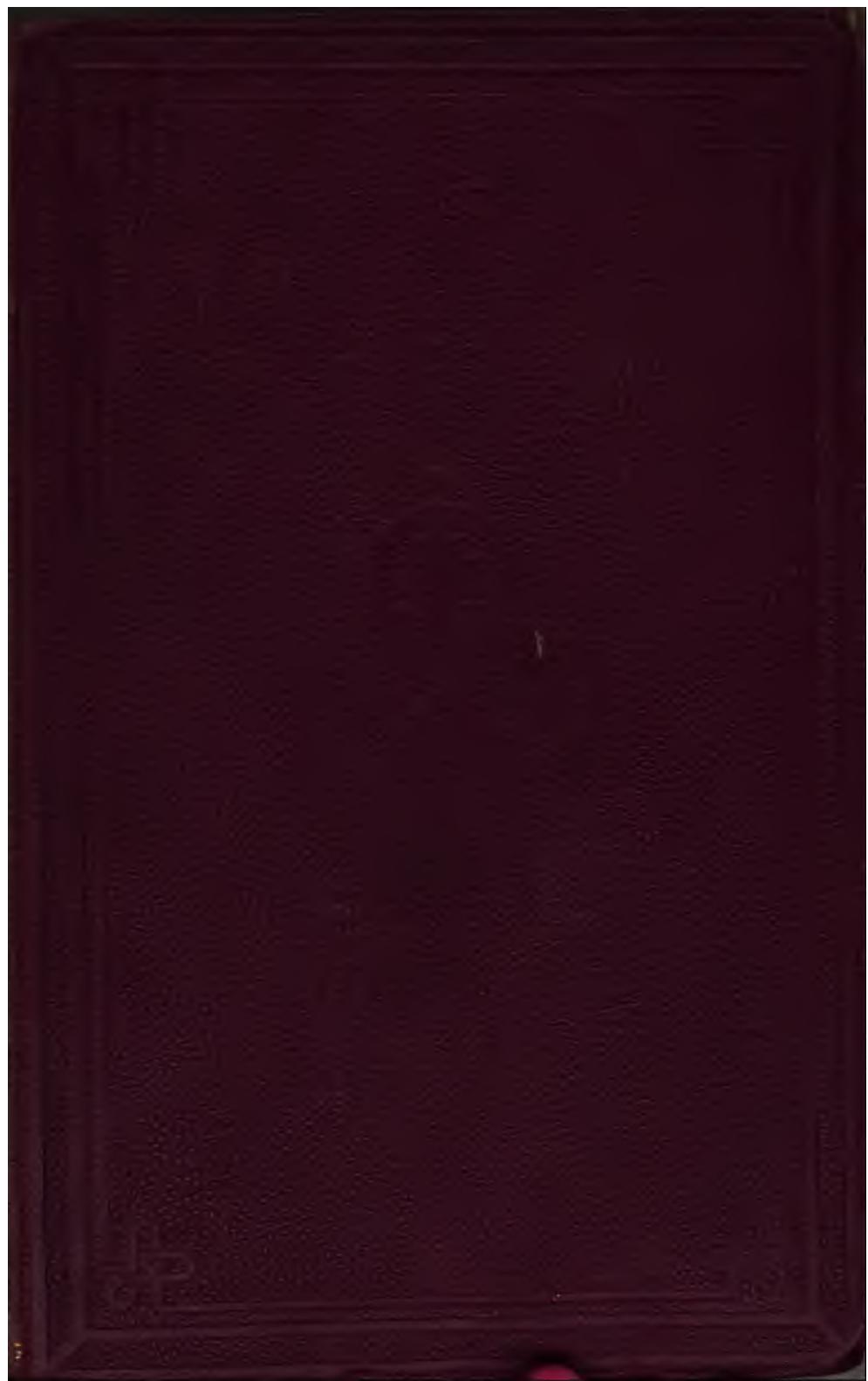
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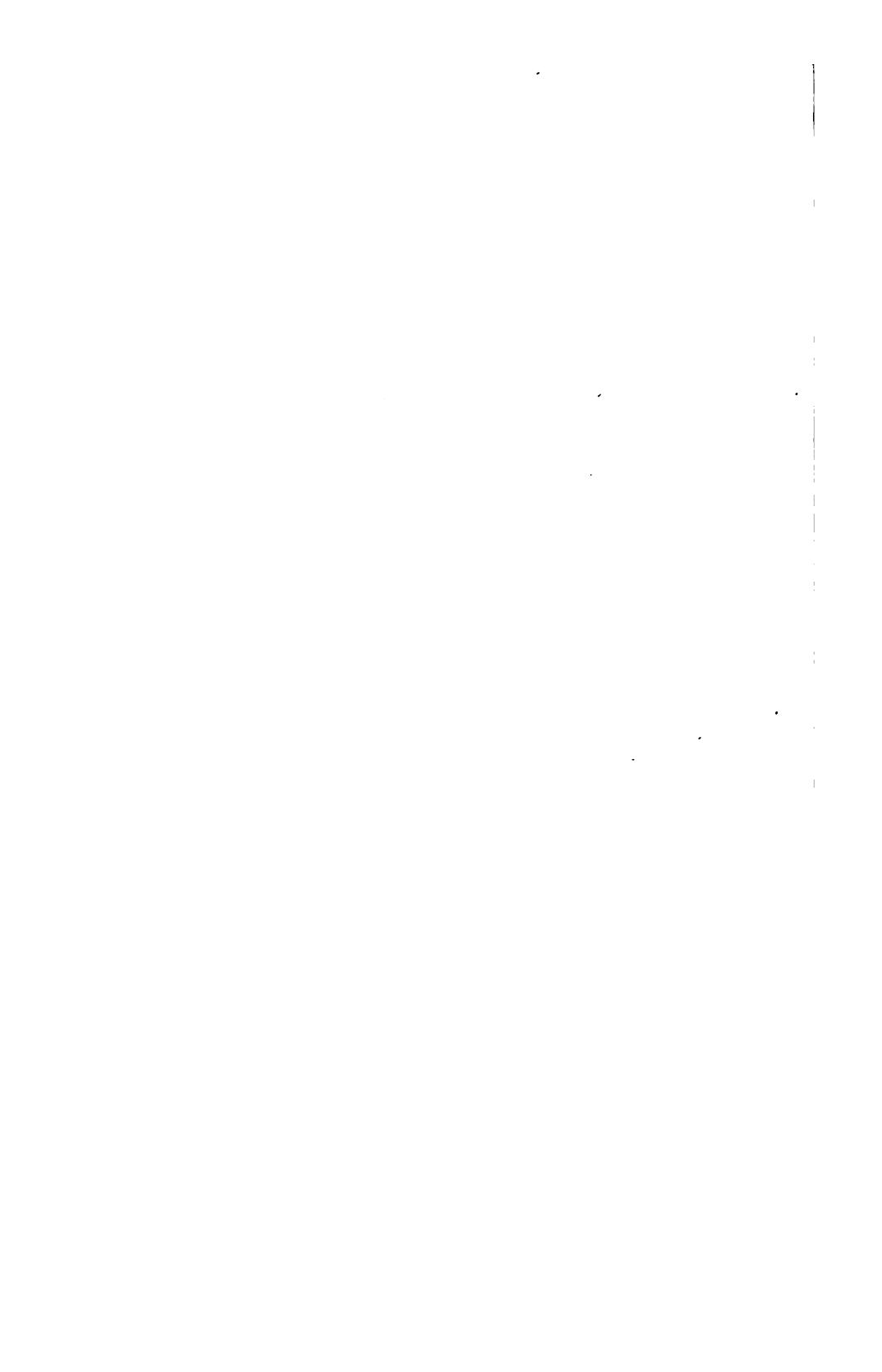












# STRATHMORE

A Romance.

By OUIDA.

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There are depths in Man that go the lengths of lowest Hell, as there are heights that reach highest Heaven; for are not both Heaven and Hell made out of him, made by him, everlasting Miracle and Mystery that he is?

CARLYLE.

Oblivion cannot be hired.—SIR THOMAS BROWNE's "*Urn Burial*."

Good and evil we know, in the field of this world, grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, that those confused seeds which were imposed upon Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out and sort asunder were not more intermixed.—MILTON.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

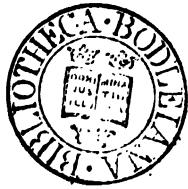
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# STRATHMORE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE ASHES IN THE LAMP.

THERE was no moment when Lady Vavasour was so resistless as in negligée in her own dressing-room. With half the pearls and diamonds of her regalia glittering on her in the presence-chamber of St. James's or the Tuileries, though perhaps more dazzling, she was less dangerous, than reclining among her cushions like the odalisque of a harem, with the light softly shaded and the air scented with attar of roses, with her shower of hair unloosed, and the folds of some texture, white as snow, or delicate in colouring as the blush on the opal, half enshrouding, half unveiling her, as the sea-foam the goddess. She was so lovely, then, at midnight or morning; and it was a privacy wherein so few saw her, while of even those few, each believed himself the only one!

Strathmore looked at her where she lay, with her

feet softly sheathed in pearl-broidered slippers, and a slight smile of amused reverie just parting her lips. It was the morning after *Hernani*, and he thought of the hint that had been thrown out to him the night before, with disdainful ridicule, and bitter scorn of the man who had employed such methods to implant the lie he had not even dared repeat. Long ago at White Ladies he had suspected where the root of Erroll's bitterness upon her lay; in the last few weeks at Auteuil his suspicion had strengthened into certainty, and this morning, as he felt her hand wander over his brow where he lay at her feet, he repented that he had allowed the memory of any friendship to stay him, and that he had not washed out with fitter punishment the coward envy that had sought to revenge itself on him by the suggestion of a hideous suspicion. Truly all better things are swept away betwixt men, when once the face of a woman has come between them!

"What are you thinking of, caro?" she asked him, softly touching his hair.

"I was thinking—how many would make you faithless to me if they could."

"What a wide field for speculation—there are hundreds! Well, if they succeeded, I should not expect you to complain."

"Hush! Do not jest about that."

"Why not?" she laughed. "Love wisely taken is a jest, you know. You would have no right to complain, Cecil. One may be queen of all the world, but

not sovereign of Oneself ; and our hearts are like Ben Jonson's 'blow-balls,' now here, now there, wherever the winds of chance and caprice like to float them. Indeed, I should expect you to take your congé with the most tranquil grace. Come ! what *would* you do if I said I loved you no longer ? "

The question was asked with that mocking malice which was part and parcel of her nature ; this delicate, youthful creature loved to torture ! His passionate eyes looked up into hers with the jealous love of Othello.

"Do ! God knows ! Take your life or my own—or both ! "

The answer was not wholly a jest, too deep a meaning lay in the look he fastened on her and the unconscious vibration of his voice ; and, for once, she felt a vague terror at the force of the love she had delighted to excite and feed, till it lost all reason in its madness ; for once she felt that she had roused what she could not so easily allay, and that the weakness she triumphed and tyrannised over, was a strength which might one day menace her, when no words of hers would be able to soothe it away. For the moment she feared the work of her own will, the next she gloried in her power, and laughed, her white fingers caressingly wandering among the dark chesnut waves of his hair.

"What a horrible answer, Cecil ! One would think we were in the *Cinque Cento* ! You swift, silent Strathmores have much more of the Italian in you than of the English nature. You ought to be a Co-

lonna or a Malatesta, with the steel in your sleeve, and the poison in your ring. What! has one love become so necessary to you, that life would be unbearable without it? Oh, Lucifer, Son of Morning, how art thou fallen!"

"But my fall has opened heaven to me, not exiled me from it," smiled Strathmore, as he lay at her feet. "Why do you wonder at my answer? Love has turned to crime in its agony more than once since the world began."

"Perhaps—but not in *our* world—"

"Where passion enters all worlds have the same law! You have made me learn the same madness as an Israelite learnt from Mariamne a thousand years ago, as twice a thousand a Spartan learnt from Cleonice."

"Who both taught it to be slain by it! What an ominous souvenir! You would not slay *me*, Cecil?"

And the loosened tresses swept against his brow, and her eyes looked laughingly yet lovingly into his.

"Almost I could, rather than other eyes should feast on you. Ah, Marion! when men love as I love, they loathe the very daylight to look on what they idolise."

"*Tu es fou,*" she interrupted him, but the words were spoken so softly that they were themselves a caress. "It is a madness, Cecil! But why, I wonder, are men who love us as you do, imperiously, avariciously, jealously, and would hate us as pitilessly,

always most dear to women? Why? It is very *bête*."

"Why? Because you know no love, worth the name, ever yet bore the shadow of a share in what it loved; because you delight to feel yourselves the mistresses of a man's life, and taste your power to give him misery or rapture, to yield him a god's delight, or cast him out to worse torture than the cursed! To learn how men can love, women must be loved as I love you."

"Ah, my cold, proud Strathmore, what lava flames lay beneath the ice!" she murmured, while the smile still hovered on her lips. "You did not know your own nature till I loved you!"

As she stooped towards him, her caress lingering on his brow, the forward movement dislodged a note which lay among the laces, silks, and Eastern stuffs piled on her luxurious couch, so that it fell, with its superscription upward, upon Strathmore's arm. He took it up to throw it towards a table which stood near, attaching no import to it, but Lady Vavasour with a quick movement interposed her hand, and as he gave it to her he caught sight of the handwriting. Coupled with the memories of the night that was just passed, it struck on Strathmore with a keener suspicion.

"You correspond with Erroll?" he said, quickly, keeping the note in his hand.

"I invite him to dinner, and he answers me," she

said, carelessly, with a little half-suppressed yawn ; “and I do it pretty often, since he is so adored a friend of yours.”

“Is this a dinner acceptation ?”

“No, a refusal. I fancy Milly Mostyn said something about his going back to England.”

She had moved her hand again as if to receive the note, but had checked herself, and lay with her head resting on her arm, with negligent grace, and her lashes drooping languidly. Nothing could be more easily indifferent than her manner, but as his eyes fastened on her, a faint colour deepened the sea-shell bloom on her cheeks, and Strathmore noted it with the swift Moor-like jealousy that always runs in leash with such a love as his. On his impulse he would have wrenched the envelope open ; honour and courtesy compelled him to restrain himself, but he did not give up the note.

“Will you permit me to read this ? I have my reasons,” he asked her. He believed she might resent, but could not refuse him.

“No !”

The single prohibition was uttered with disdainful nonchalance and haughty sovereignty ; the superb and graceful indignation of a proud woman subjected to a doubt that is insult.

“No ? Why not ? You claim your right to my confidence, I claim my title to yours.”

She raised herself upon her arm from her cushions, with questioning wonder in her eyes, and a smile of

scorn upon her lips—she, Marion Vavasour, to be arraigned in judgment by a lover who was as wax in her hands, and whom she could have bent to any sin, or any folly, at her word! She to be doubted, questioned, opposed!

“Confidence!” she re-echoed, with a scornful curl on her lovely lips, and an angry light in her eyes, very new to them, for Marion Vavasour was by nature of a sunny, insouciant temper, rarely troubled by irritation or bitterness. “What confidence can be needed in such a trifle? You have lost your senses, Cecil, I think. Certainly, since you presume to disbelieve my word, I shall not allow you to insult me by verifying it.”

“It is not I who have lost my senses, but you your memory, Madame,” said Strathmore, the black jealousy in him leaping into sudden life. “Discourteous or not, I must doubt either your word or your recollection. This is a strangely lengthy ‘dinner refusal.’”

The letter, which had half fallen from its envelope, was of four pages, closely covered with many lines. For an instant her colour deepened and then died out, leaving her cheek pale, her eyes sank beneath his, and her fluent tongue was silent. Strathmore rose to his feet, grasping the letter in his hand, a hideous suspicion coiling round him, and the jealous love in him working up in silence.

“Since you must be in error as regards its meaning, Lady Vavasour, do you now permit me to read this mere ‘dinner refusal?’”

“No!”

And as the single word was launched from her lips in haughty denial, with the swift movement peculiar to her she raised herself from her pile of cushions, caught the note in her hand, twisting it by a rapid action from his hold, and held it to a spirit-lamp, that was burning liquid perfume on the table, which stood, with her coffee, at her elbow. The flame caught, it flared alight, and shrivelling in a second, the note fell, a harmless heap of light grey ashes, into the jasper saucer of the lamp, its words destroyed, its secret safe. Then she laughed softly and amusedly at her own success—her mood changing like a child’s.

“Amigo mio,” she said, gaily, “never oppose a woman—she will always outwit you! While you have but one mode of Menace, we have a thousand resources of Finesse!”

Lady Vavasour was laughing, tranquil, at her ease again, now that the note was floating among the liquid perfume in ashes which could tell no tales. Done in one moment, ere he could arrest her hand or avert the flame, the action literally for that moment confounded Strathmore, and struck him dumb; the next, the abhorred suspicion seemed written in letters of flame before his eyes. His love, though an utter slavery in its bondage, was imperious in its dark and bitter jealousy; the blood rushed over his forehead, and his teeth clenched hard, as he saw the ashes fall into the essence, and heard her low, soft laugh of triumph.

“That letter holds a secret so dear that you destroy

it! So be it, then! I will wrench it out of the man who shares it!"

He moved to leave her presence, but, before he could escape her, she raised herself from her couch, and laid her hand on his arm—the hand that could hold him closely as a chain of iron:

"Cecil, you must be mad! Wait and listen to me."

Every word of her voice he was used to obey as though he had no law save her will; but the very weakness of the love she had triumphed over, made its ferocity when crossed with the looming shadow of the slightest rivalry; now he threw her hand off him.

"Listen!—you have palmed one falsehood off on me, already, why wait for another? Your own secrets you must keep as you will, but the man who shares them shall answer to me——"

"You are mad, Cecil!" cried Marion Vavasour again, her eyes lighting with pretty contemptuous anger, as of a spoiled beauty crossed in her will, while the slender hand closed still on his arm with a movement that, slight as it was, might betray anxiety. "I forbid you to do any such thing! *My* name disputed over, as over some dancer's, or rosière's! I forbid it—I will not have it!"

"Let me go!" said Strathmore, so rife with passion that he scarce knew or heeded what he said. "Let me go! You have lied to me, and I will know what made the need of a lie. You burnt the letter, lest I should even see one word; I have a right to know

what those words were which must have been faithlessness to me ; I cannot grind it from *you* by force—I will seek it where I can, and, by God ! if——”

The words broke asunder unuttered ; he could not put into plain speech the hideous thought which he would have disbelieved, in the teeth of all evidence on earth or heaven, save her own witness against her. His strength went down under the torture of the mere doubt that she could be faithless to him, and the oath died away on his lips, which were blanched as death ; his love swept aside all beyond itself ; to *her* he had no pride, and he threw himself beside her, twining in his hands her loosened hair, and scorching her brow with his breath.

“I *am* mad, if you will ! My God ! have pity on me. I never stooped to any living thing—I stoop to you ! Give a thought to another you shall not—you cannot ! For the love of Heaven, tell me what it is you hide ? ”

“No !”

And she thought with a woman’s glad, pitiless idolatry of power how utterly this man loved her !

“Do not trifle with me,” muttered Strathmore, incoherently twisting round his hands, in his delirious suffering, the golden meshes of her hair, as though with that frail bond to knit her to him through life and death. “Tell me the truth—the truth !—or I will wrench it from the coward who has robbed me. No man should thieve even a glance of yours, and live——”

The words were muttered in his throat, fierce in

their menace, yet imploring in their pain ; his very life—more than his life !—hung on this woman's love. She saw he was no longer to be played with ; she saw that every syllable he said would be wrought out ; she saw that *here*—with his jealous passions loosed—he was no more her slave, but had become her master, and Marion Vavasour shrank from his grasp and from his gaze ;—she feared the strength of what she had invoked.

But she was a woman who knew well how to deal with the men she ruled. Her hand gently touched his brow, and she stooped towards him with a pitying, tender smile :

“ Ah, Cecil ! can you not trust me even in so little ? Sceptic ! you are unjust and cruel ; I but burnt that letter to spare you pain ! ”

“ To *spare* me pain ! Quick !—tell me all—all ! ”

“ No,” she whispered, bending till her wooing lips kissed his brow ; “ let it pass. You know I love you —love but you ? Let it pass, my dearest ! ”

“ Never ! Tell me—at once—or I seek him this moment.”

She stooped lower still, while her fragrant breath was warm on his cheek, and her whisper stole on his ear :

“ Then—then (let it stir no words between you, Cecil, for *my* sake !)—but—your friend was very treacherous to you, and that letter spoke a love which was as hateful to me as it was craven to you. That is all the truth ! Forgive me its concealment ; I would so gladly have saved you its pain ! ”

## CHAPTER II.

### THE SWOOP OF THE VULTURE.

AN hour afterwards, Strathmore quitted the Bosquet de Diane, and took his way across the grounds. He walked at his usual leisurely pace, he had a cigar in his mouth, and his manner was tranquil as usual. But a dog glancing at him would have shrunk whining and frightened away, and a stranger meeting him, and looking at the deadly glitter in his eyes under their drooped lids, would have thought, "that man is bound on a merciless errand." The hour was just mid-day, the birds had ceased from song, the scythe lay among the unshaven grass, the vintagers afar off had left their work, the very leaves hung stirless. All nature was calm and at rest—all, save the same passions which have drenched the laughing earth in blood, and mocked the sweet, hushed stillness of the summer skies, and made the fair day hideous with their riot, since the suns of Asia shone on the white,

upturned face of the First Dead, and the curse was branded on the brow of Cain.

Strathmore crossed the gardens without haste in his steps, his hand closing on a little cane; the blood of his race ran unchanged in his veins, dark with that ruthless wrath which had never yielded to the memory of mercy, the prayers of pity, or the rights of justice, and which had scathed all out of its path, as the scythe sweeps the seeding-grass. To the woman he had quitted he had said but little; but he left her to revenge the coward who would have robbed him, by such chastisement as men do not speak of to women. Less fully told than hinted at, less gathered by deliberate evidence than grasped in all its broad, accursed meaning, the treachery stood out black and bare before him. In his revenge he would have spared no living thing that could have risen up betwixt him and it; had he known of any darker, fuller, fouler, which his birth and breeding could have permitted, or the age and the world allowed, he would have made the man he now hated drain it to the last drop. He had left her, soothing her fears, promising her no violence—left her, with the passions in his blood, that in darker ages far back, had trodden out human life pitilessly and recklessly, as so much waste water spilt, and had scored down with unrelenting bitterness the ruthless motto of a ruthless race, “Slay! and spare not.”

He walked across the grounds alone—once he glanced up. The radiant day seemed hot with flame,

and the cloudless heavens looked brazen in the light. But he went onward, still calmly, leisurely as before, but with the bloodhound's thirst growing stronger and stronger within him, and set but on one goal. What *are* our passions, once let loose, but sleuth-hounds freed from leash, which run down all before them, and hunt on even to the death?

A breadth of sward alone separated the *maisonette* of Lady Vavasour from the villa beyond. He opened the gates and passed on, leaving the paradise of roses behind him. Through the glades of trees the terrace which ran before the villa was visible, and a group of men were standing there. Three of them were strangers to him, the fourth was Erroll, who was standing with a brace of setters at his feet, behind him the open window of the dark oak library he had just quitted, before him all the light of the summer noontide.

Strathmore saw him—and his hand clenched down on the cane he held, that dainty jewelled switch, fragile and costly enough for a lady's riding-whip. As the sun flickered through the branches on to his face it was calm and impassive, but there was a cruel smile about his mouth, and his grey eyes were black and lustrous, with a fierce, eager light.

The setters as he approached gave tongue, and Erroll turned. He was talking with them of Court beauties, of Blois races, of the baccarat at Lilli Dorah's, of all the trifles and the chit-chat of an ordinary Paris day; for we smoke and gossip and

laugh and dine while our lives are making shipwreck, and all we value is drifting away to the greedy, tideless, sea of a fathomless past, that will never give back its dead.

As he looked up his face brightened—he thought Strathmore was come for a tacit reconciliation. Enough had been said twelve hours before to have steeled him to any such feeling; but his nature was not capable of harbouring revenge: he forgave freely—as he would have forgiven now, even such epithets as men never pardon, for the sake of all those thousand memories of childhood, and of manhood, that were still warm about his heart, not even to be washed out, and trampled from remembrance, by the tide of a jealous love, or by the sting of a bitter feud.

He looked up, a smile of pleasure lighting his eyes, which had been heavy and worn before; and Strathmore saw him as he came up the turf terrace—the man who had once flung himself in his defence into the near grip of death, who had been with him in shifting scenes of danger, pleasure, revel, or privation, and who had trusted him and shared his trust, as though the same mother had borne them, since they had been children together playing with the fallen chesnuts, or wading in the shallow estuaries under the woods of White Ladies, far away in England. Strathmore saw him, and his hand closed tighter on the switch, with which he moved out of his path the curling tendrils of the clematis. The revenge of men

of his blood had always been swift and silent, but they had always *tasted* it, slowly yet thirstily, drop by drop, with the fierce delight of the vulture, as it sweeps and circles above its prey before it swoops down to wrench and tear.

He went up the terrace-slope leisurely, and lifted his hat with suave courtesy, the soft ceremony in which the Strathmores of White Ladies had ever clothed their deadliest approach, the silky velvet glove which they had ever drawn over the merciless iron hand whose grip was death.

Erroll stood leaning against the side of the window; he could not make the first movement towards a tacit reconciliation, but he was ready to meet, to more than meet, one. He only needed his friend's hand stretched out to him in silence, to give his own, and mutely forgive the worst words which had been uttered twelve hours before.

“*Pardon, messieurs!*” said Strathmore, quietly passing the other men, while they parted to let him approach: as the sun fell on it, his face wore a strange look, out of keeping with the easy suavity of his manner. He moved on to the library window, where Erroll stood, with the sunlight full upon his face. Calmly, as though he tendered them a cigar, Strathmore glanced round him at the three other men, with a bitter evil scorn about his lips.

“Gentlemen! is there any answer save one customary to a lie?”

The men—young fellows—surprised and embar-

rassed, hesitated ; Erroll looked up, the angry blood rushing hotly to his face ; but he stretched out his hand with an involuntary gesture.

"Strathmore ! you are in gross error ! Come within here a moment ; I must have one more word with you."

"*Words are not my answer !*"

And as the syllables left his lips, hurled out in blind and deadly fury, he lifted his right arm, the jewelled handle of the cane flashed in the sunlight, the switch swirled through the air like a flail, with a shrill sound, and in the swiftness of a second had struck a broad, livid mark across Erroll's brow, brutal as a death-stroke, ineffaceable as shame.

"*That for your treachery to me. I will have your life for your love for her.*"

The words were hissed in Erroll's ear as the blow fell, low but distinct as the hiss of a snake, chill as steel, relentless as death. As he reeled back, for the moment staggered and blinded, Strathmore's eyes fastened on the swollen crimson bar, where the switch had cut its mark, with the steady, pitiless greed for revenge that, fed to the full, yet clamoured still for more. In the blazing glare of the hot noon the vile, ineffaceable insult seemed stamped on the living flesh in letters of flame, which nothing in past, or present, or future, could ever cover or wash out, for which blood alone could ever atone—he laughed a low, chill, mocking laugh. Breaking the switch in two, he threw the fragments down at the feet of the man he

had struck, his eyes glittering exultant, the veins in his face black and swollen in the fury of his wrath, a scornful smile set about his lips, as he turned to the others with a slight bow of careless courtesy :

“ Gentlemen ! you are my witnesses——” but Erroll’s hand struck his lips to silence with a force that would have sent a weaklier man hurled backward to the earth. “ By God ! you must answer this.”

The oath rattled in his throat, his face was white, save where the red cat stood out across his brow ; his voice was hoarse and his breath stifled as the words gasped out ; the suddenness of the foul indignity seemed to have paralysed in him all save the sheer instinct of its revenge, and to have numbed and stricken even that.

“ With pleasure ! ”

“ Where ? ”

The single word came from Erroll’s throat hoarse and suffocated with passion.

“ In the Deer-park of the Bois, by the pond, if it suit you.”

“ Your hour ? ”

“ At sunset to-night ? I am engaged until then.”

“ I shall await you.”

“ Soit ! ”

With those few rapid words all was said ; all had been done and spoken in less than sixty seconds, swift as thought and breathless as passion, staggering and bewildering those who looked on like the sudden flash

of lightning in their eyes. Then he turned, bowed low to those standing by, passed along the terrace, and took his way across the lawn back to the Bosquet de Diane. He was well content. Half his vengeance was wrought, the rest could not now escape him. He thought of the brutal and ineffaceable insult he had given with pitiless delight; of all yet to come he thought as thirstily; the jealous hatred and the revengeful greed that were within him could only be sated with one requital—life! Life! which in a few hours' time would be in his hands and at his mercy. Mercy, I say?—the word has nothing to do with him; it was not in his blood nor in his creed. As ruthlessly as he had dealt out insult, he had it in him now to deal out death.

Once he glanced upward at the sky above-head, and as the hot beams fell on his eyes, across his pitiless and exultant thoughts, there strayed by some strange chain of memory, old familiar words, unheard, unread since childhood: “Let not the sun go down upon thy wrath.”

The sun was high in the noontide heavens, shining without shadow on the day that was at its full—the day that had dawned to be weighted with the wail of new lives, and the sighs of dying lips, with the burden of crowding crimes, and the bitterness of human words, with the cry of the slaughtered in far-off battle-fields, and the pent breathing of the toilers in great cities. When the sun should sink and the day fade into night, who should call back warmth to the lips they had seen close for ever; who should render unsaid the words

they had heard curse the living; who should have power to bid them return to restore the deeds undone, the sin unwrought, the graves unsealed, and yield back the hours garnered to the past?

The old words, with their grand simplicity of counsel and of warning, crossed his memory; words which mark the short day all too long for men's wrath to endure. God forgive him! Strathmore only thought how, when that sun should rise to light another day, there should be one lost from amongst the numbers of the living, one human life the less upon the peopled earth!

Furies' passions blinded him with their accursed lust, and his soul was set on vengeance—vengeance that would know no pity, and yield no shrive.

From the sultry glare of the terrace he passed by abrupt transition into the aisles of the rose-gardens, into the midst of gay groups gathered about Marion Vavasour; and, with a game of life and death to be played out before the sun went down, he joined in with the jests, the impromptu, the epigram, the graceful flatteries, as lightly and laughingly as any there. There was not a sign by which to tell his past errand, not a glimpse to disclose the purpose on to which his will was set; yet there was one whom the easy wit did not blind, whom the careless nonchalance did not deceive, and at first the bloom had wavered anxiously on her cheek, quickly, however, to be succeeded by an amused, exultant light in her gazelle eyes.

Like Cunigunde, she loved well to see those whom

she had ensnared reel up to dizzy heights, and stagger downwards to yawning chasms, courting death, and wasting life, to feast her eyes with proof of her own power.

"Come to me in a few minutes," she said, in a low tone, as she passed into the house an hour or two after. Her idlest whisper was his law, and he obeyed, entering her boudoir, where the light stole subdued, and dreamy oriental odours filled the air.

She stood by an étagère of flowers, idly toying with their blossoms, and turned towards him as he approached, with the imperious grace that so well became her :

"Where had you been, Cecil, when you came into the rose-garden ?"

"To the stables. I know how you value Mazeppa, too well to leave her to the stud-grooms."

The answer was careless and natural ; there was nothing to indicate that the reply was even an evasion ; but Lady Vavasour made a gesture of impatience.

"Mazeppa and I thank you much, but you came by the west gate of the gardens ; the stables lie to the south. Never play with me, never evade me, it is utterly useless ! You had been to Bertie Erroll ?"

"Indeed, no. You are distressing yourself most needlessly, my dearest!"

Strathmore spoke softly and persuasively ; he was solicitous to guard from her even a suspicion of what was unfitting for her ear and her sex in the work which was wrought by her own beauty.

"Hush!" she said, petulantly, her eyes glancing into his, with the gaze with which she knew she could have made him lay bare the dearest secret that ever locked in honour. "You are only deceiving me, Cecil, You have broken your word; you have taken revenge when you promised me to forbear it."

"Well!—I do not come of an over-forbearing race."

He spoke with a slight smile—a smile that, momentary as it was, struck a chill to her like the touch of cold steel. She shuddered for an instant as she caught a glimpse of what this man's revenge *might be*; shuddered as though with a prophetic dread of the future—that dread which romancists idly call "presentiment," but which is often only the reflected colour, thrown before our steps, from our own past acts and follies, as our shadow falls in advance of us as we walk.

"What did you say to him?" she asked, quickly.

And the light was so shaded, that the flush of a certain anxiety which came and went in her cheek escaped him. As great sovereigns have feared their most abject slaves, when the might of their own tyranny has roused proportionate might of passion in those who have long bent the knee to their word, so she now began to fear this man, whose love, now his weakness, might so soon become his strength—a strength to crush its tyrant.

"What did you say to him?" she repeated, impatiently. "I *will* know, Strathmore!"

He saw that she already guessed too truly to be evaded longer, and her will in its lightest caprice lay on him like an iron chain, dragging him where it would.

“I said nothing. I am not fond of words.”

“What was it that you *did*, then?”

“Do not ask, my loveliest! These are not themes for a woman’s ear.”

“But I *will* know!”

“Why? It is not a subject for you. Be content, your name is involved in no way. You may surely trust me to guard against that!”

“But I *WILL* know!” There was all her wilful, imperious witching tyranny in the words, and in the gesture with which she spoke them. “What have you done?”

“I have treated him as I should treat a hound that bit me.”

Even though he spoke to a woman, he could not restrain the pitiless passion that vibrated through his voice, and she understood without translation.

“And he?”

“He has but one course open. A coward would have to meet me, and he is not that.”

An eager, exultant gladness lightened in her eyes, a flushed warmth came on her cheek, her graceful loveliness grew instinct, for one fleeting instant, with the fierceness of the panther as it rises for its spring; —for one instant, while it lent to her beauty a glow almost fearful, a life almost terrible, the dark revenge

of a Theodora was given to a creature soft and radiant as the morning.

"You are right—you are right," she said, with nervous force. "I was wrong who bid you stay your hand. Revenge it! Revenge becomes your race! Could I think you weak! submit to such rank treachery; sit silent under such perfidious rivalry? Revenge it, Strathmore! You are right."

The fierce words came strangely from those soft lips, that only parted with sweet laughter, or gave a wooing caress. Her hand closed upon the rich blossoms among which it wandered, crushing and breaking them. She stood there, fatal in her dazzling loveliness, fascinating him, confirming to fresh strength every evil instinct in him, inciting to yet darker deed every worst passion of his soul, luring and tempting him to the impending crime which grew holier and dearer to him with every instant that drew him nearer to its act.

If he had loved her ere now, in this hour he adored her! The passion of his own nature found answering echo, spur, and unison in hers. In his mood then, a woman who had stood between him and his wrath would have been hurled out of his path, though he had worshipped her; the woman who spurred him to his revenge became thrice idolised, as her voice spoke the thoughts, and goaded the lusts, of his heart. He crushed her in a close embrace.

"Be content! No man should seek to rob me of your love, and live!"

"But—ah, my God!—I forgot. If your life should pay forfeit!"

The words died on her lips, her face was blanched, her eyes filled with the sudden terror of a horrible remembrance, the piteous fear of a ghastly thought—now she was but a woman, who loved!

"That I must risk. But whether my own life fall or not, my revenge will not escape me."

While he soothed and thanked her with his caresses, the answer, brief as it was, was pregnant with meaning. With the dews of death heavy upon him, and the mists of death blinding his eyes, he would still find strength to keep his grip upon his vengeance, and to take it standing on the brink of a yawning grave, which would, at the least, close over *both*.

"But Cecil—Cecil—your own danger!"

It was the anguished cry of a woman's love, imploring in its terror, yearning in its tenderness, shrinking in horror from the near approach of a fatal hour for him whom she holds dear, or,—it was the most marvellous and matchless acting with which the false breath of a woman's lips ever yet duped man?

"Do not think of it, my worshipped one; think as little as I! But—if it chance so, if I never look upon your face again, kiss my lips when they are cold, kiss my eyes when they are closed, that your love may be with me in my grave; and remember, my love for you was such, that when my life was at its sweetest, when my years were at their richest, I died to revenge one whisper which sought to steal you from me!"

The poor man's answer broke from his lips, harshe and tremulous; while the hot tears that rose in his throat and swam exultant in his eyes—the first woman had ever grieved there—as he looked on her in her lovelessness and so vague that when the morning rose her life might have in it warmth to waken him, her voice no power to call him back to life, his eyes be forever blind and sightless to her gaze. Her own tears fell upon his brow as she bent towards him: but her glance looked into his with responsive meaning, her face brightened with his own villain-thirst for vengeance, a smile of superb triumph wanstoned on her lips—triumph to this sway, and give away at will, to death or life, this man's entire existence!

"Ah! this is to be loved, indeed, as poets have fabled and as women have dreamed! Strathmore, revenge yourself and me—revenge! It is meet and just. And death shall not scathe you, nor come nigh you, my beloved. You shall return unharmed, untouched, to find your reward *here!*"

She pressed his hand to her heart, where it beat warm and quick beneath its costly lace. As she bent over him, her voice sank to all its wooing softness, but thrilling with a new and fiercer meaning, which fostered every darker passion in him, as tropic heat fosters the poison-plants to seed and blossom, tempting and goading him to the crime that was sweet in his eyes as the gold-haired Gunhilda in the old Norse-days woode Eric the Viking to the sin of Cain. These were the passions that she loved to rouse in men, and

see run riot in their deadly course ; when a whisper, a caress from her, might have slaked them, her lips only fanned the flame !

And here, an eager thirst for revenge craved its food in her as in him ; here, this soft and radiant creature was *cruel* as any panther that ever crouched, any snake that ever reared its brilliant painted crest.

### CHAPTER III.

**"AND THE SUN WENT DOWN UPON HIS WRATH."**

THE sun was setting, descending beyond purple bars of cloud, and leaving a long golden trail behind it in its track—sinking slowly and solemnly towards the west as the day declined, without rest, yet without haste, as though to give to all the sons of earth, warning and time, to leave no evil rooted, no bitterness unhealed, no feud to ripen, and no crime to bring forth seed, when the day should have passed away to be numbered with hours irrevocable; and the night should cast its pall over the dark deeds done, and seal their graves never to be unclosed. The sun was setting, shedding its rich and yellow light over the green earth, on the winding waters, and the blue hills afar off, and down the thousand leafy aisles close by. But to one place that warm radiance did not wander, in one spot the rays did not play, the glory did not enter. That place was the Deer-pond of the

old Bois, where the dank plants brooding on the fœtid waters, which only stirred with noisome things, had washed against the floating hair of lifeless women, and the sombre branches of the crowding trees had been dragged earthward by the lifeless weight of the self-slain, till the air seemed to be poisonous with death, and the grasses, as they moved, to whisper to the winds dread secrets of the Past. There, the light of the summer evening did not come, but only through the leafless boughs of one seared tree, which broke and parted the dark barrier of forest growth, they saw the west, and the sun declining slowly in its haze of golden air, sinking downward past the bars of cloud.

All was quiet, save the dull sound of the parting waters, when some loathsome reptiles stirred among its brakes, or the hot breeze moved its pestilential plants; and in the silence they who had been as brothers, and who now were foes, stood fronting each other: in this silence they had met, in it they would part. And there, on their right hand, through the break in the dank wall of leaves, shone the Sun, looking earthward, luminous and blinding human sight like the gaze of God.

The light from the west fell upon Erroll, touching the fair locks of his silken hair, and shining in his azure eyes as they looked up at the sunny skies, where a bird was soaring and circling in space, happy through its mere sense and joy of life. On Strathmore's face the deep shadows slanted, leaving it as

though cast in bronze, chill and tranquil as that of a marble god's, each feature set into the merciless repose of one immovable purpose. Their faces were strangely contrasted, for the serenity of the one was that of a man who fearlessly awaits an inevitable doom, the serenity of the other that of a man who mercilessly deals out an implacable fate; and while in the one those present saw but the calmness of courage and of custom, in the other they vaguely shrank from a new and an awful meaning. For beneath the suave smile of the Duellist, they read the intent of the Murderer.

The night was nigh at hand, soon the day must be gathered to the past, such harvest garnered with it as men's hands had sown throughout its brief twelve hours, which are so short in span, yet are so long in sin.

**"LET NOT THE SUN GO DOWN UPON YOUR WRATH!"**

There, across the west, in letters of flame, the warning of the Hebrew scroll was written on the purple skies; but he who should have read them stood immutable yet insatiate, with the gleam of a tiger's lust burning in his eyes, the lust when it scents blood; the lust that only slakes its thirst in life.

They fronted one another, those who had lived as brothers; while at their feet babbled the poisonous waters, and on their right hand shone the evening splendour of the sun. Their eyes met, and in the

gaze of the one was a compassionate pardon, but in the gaze of the other a relentless lust.

The duel was *à la barrière*; and the lot of the seconds' toss-up fell to Strathmore; giving him the right to fire first. They turned, and stood back to back; waiting the signal.

“One!”

The word fell down upon the silence, and the hiss of a shrill cicala echoed to it like a devil's laugh.

And the sun sank slowly downward beyond the barrier of purple cloud, passing away from earth.

“Two!”

Again the single word dropped out upon the stillness, marking the flight of the seconds; again the hoot of the cicala echoed it, laughing hideously from its noisome marsh.

And the sun sank slowly, still slowly, nearer and nearer to its shroud of mist, bearing with it all that lingered of the day.

“Three!”

The white death-signal flickered in the breeze, and the last golden rays of the sun were still above the edge of the storm-cloud.

There was yet time.

But the warning was not read: there was the assassin's devilish greed within Strathmore's soul, the assassin's devilish smile upon his lips; the calmness of his face never changed, the tranquil pulse of his wrist never quickened, the remorseless gleam of his eyes never softened. The doom written in his look



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*A*

*B*

*C*

*D*

*E*

*F*

*G*

*H*

*I*

*J*

*K*

*L*

*M*

*N*

*O*

*P*

*Q*

*R*

*S*

never relaxed. He wheeled round—in seeming, carelessly, as you may turn to aim at carrion birds—but his shot sped home.

One moment Erroll stood erect, his fair hair blowing in the wind, his eyes full open to the light; then—he reeled slightly backward, raised his right arm, and fired in the air. The bullet flew far and harmless amidst the forest foliage, his pistol dropped, and without sign or sound he fell down upon the sodden turf, his head striking against the earth with a dull echo, his hands drawing up the rank herbage by the roots, as they closed convulsively in one brief spasm.

He was shot through the lungs.

The sun sank out of sight, leaving a dusky, sultry gloom to brood over the noxious brakes and sullen stagnant waters, leaving the world to Night, as fitting watch and shroud of Crime; and those who stood there were stricken with a ghastly horror, paralysed by a vague and sudden awe, for they knew that they were in the presence of death, and that the hand which had dealt it was the hand of his chosen friend. But he, who had slain him, more coldly, more pitilessly than the merciful amongst us would slay a dog, stood unmoved in the shadow, with his ruthless calm, his deadly serenity, which had no remorse as it had had no mercy, while about his lips there was a cold and evil smile, and in his eyes gleamed the lurid flame of a tiger's triumph—the triumph when it has tasted blood, and slaked its thirst in life.

*“Fuyez!—il est mort!”*

The words, uttered in his ear by Valdor, were hoarse and almost tremulous ; but he heard and assented to them unmoved. An exultant light shone and glittered in his eyes ; he had avenged himself and her ! Life was the sole price that his revenge had set ; his purpose had been as iron, and his soul was as bronze. He went nearer, leisurely, and stooped and looked at the work of his hand. In the gloom the dark-red blood could yet be clearly seen, slowly welling out and staining the clotted herbage as it flowed, while one stray gleam of light still stole across, as if in love and pity, and played about the long fair hair which trailed among the grass.

Life still lingered, faintly, flickeringly, as though loth to leave for ever that, which one brief moment before, had been instinct with all its richest glory ; the eyes opened wide once more, and looked up to the evening skies with a wild, delirious, appealing pain, and the lips which were growing white and drawn, moved in a gasping prayer :

"Oh God ! I forgive—I forgive.—He did not know——!"

Then his head fell back, and his eyes gazed upward without sight or sense, and murmuring low a woman's name, "Lucille ! Lucille !" while one last breath shivered like a deep-drawn sigh through all his frame—he died.

And his murderer stood by to see the shudder convulse the rigid limbs, and count each lingering pang —calm, pitiless, unmoved, his face so serene in its chill

indifference, its brutal and unnatural tranquillity, whilst beneath the drooped lids, his eyes watched with the dark glitter of a triumphant vengeance, the last agony of the man whom he had loved, that the two who were with him in this hour shrank involuntarily from his side, awed more by the Living than by the Dead. Almost unconsciously they watched him, fascinated by a dumb horror, as he stooped and severed a long flake of hair that was soiled by the dank earth and wet with the dew; unarrested they let him turn away with the golden lock in his hand and the fatal calm on his face, and move to the spot where his horse was waiting. The beat of the hoofs rang muffled on the turf, growing fainter and fainter as the gallop receded. Strathmore rode to her whose bidding had steeled his arm, and whose soft embrace would be his reward; rode swift and hard, with his hand closing fast on the promised pledge of his vengeance, while behind him, in the shadows of the falling night, lay the man whom he had once loved, whom he had now slain, with the light of early stars breaking pale and cold, to shine upon the oozing blood as it trailed slowly in its death-stream through the grasses, staining red the arid turf.

And the sun had gone down upon his wrath.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

THE golden curl of the dead man's hair lay in her lap, in pledge and proof that her bidding had been done, that his revenge was taken; and she stooped over her lover, this Messalina with her cheek of child-like bloom, this Circe with her glance of gazelle-softness, and wreathed her white arms about him, and leaned on his her fragrant lips. And he was happy! —ay, as the drunkard is in the reeling madness of his revel, as the opium-eater is in the delirious insanities of his excitation; he was happy with this guilt at his door, with this life on his soul, while the tresses of her hair swept soft against his cheek, and the languor of her eyes looked back into his own.

Remorse was not upon him,—she, even as she was his idol, became also his conscience and his God. His

honour had bent like a green wither in her hands, and crime had no sting since it was just and sweet in her sight.

The past hour left no trail of its horror, the death summoned at his will followed him with no reproach; as he had been without mercy, so he was now without remorse: the ghastly breath of the grave did not chill him in the dreamy warmth of her kisses, and in his heart the plague-spot of crime was not felt while it beat upon hers. As a man after deep draughts of strong wine has all memory dizzily drowned, but every sense subtilely heated and roused, so the fierce passions of which he had drunk so deeply in one brief twelve hours had dulled all conscience, and fanned his blood to flame. For her sake, at her bidding, he had steeped his soul in the guilt of murder; and so much the more deeply as it doomed him, so much the sweeter grew his love. And the silken gold of the dead man's hair lay there, wet and soiled with the night dews; and he, the Living, gave it no glance of pity, no shudder of remorse, but looked up only to the eyes of the enchantress, and only drew her rich lips closer to his own.

What though a hell had yawned before him for this deed?—his heaven lay here in a woman's soft embrace. What were God or man to him?—she smiled upon his sin.

“Strathmore!”

Low whispered, the name struck on his ear as he

passed the open window of a corridor leading back to his own room, in the grey of the early dawn. The casement looked upon the gardens, and in the faint light he saw the figure of a man standing there below.

“Strathmore!”

At the second whisper he turned towards the embrasure, and leaned out:

“Who are you?”

“I—hush!” said the speaker, in whom he now recognised Erroll’s second. “Wake no one, or they will wonder why I come like a thief in the twilight. As I saw you pass the window, I thought it better to call you than to rouse the house. I came to tell you that to-night’s affair may be the subject of inquiry, and that it would be wise for you to get out of France.”

“Pshaw! All I do I defend.”

He spoke carelessly and contemptuously where he leaned against the embrasure, looking down on the speaker, who, although his adversary’s second, had been an acquaintance also of his own.

“As you choose, I only tell you. Sir Arthur has rallied enough to be furious in his grief. For myself, I shall go across the frontier. I have no fancy to wait for the fracas.”

“That will be as you please, but it cannot concern me.”

The other looked up at him in the light of the new-risen sun, with something of that feeling, which had

made him shrink from the man who had stood with a pinless smile on his lips, to watch the death throes slacken and grow still. He was a soldier, and thought little of a life taken or spared, but even he shuddered at Strathmore's calm indifference, whilst as yet but the short space of one summer's night stretched betwixt so dark a tragedy and its author.

"No," he said, bluntly. "I believe you take no concern save in what touches *yourself*!" But Erroll bade me, if he fell, give you this; it is all he left to my charge—save another for a woman in England."

He lifted his hand, standing on the stone coping, and held up a letter. Strathmore stretched and took it, and the other turned away, without more words, and strode back across the lawn in the gloaming.

The sun had risen high enough for the writing to be clear, and as his eyes fell on the superscription, where he stood alone in the deserted corridor while all around him slept, for the first time his own revenge recoiled back on him; he remembered how the life which he had taken had once been perilled for his own; he remembered how this man had loved him! The suddenness of this unlooked-for message from the dead, awoke memories which staggered his merciless and immutable calm. He crushed the letter in his hold unread, and, leaving the house, went out into the dawn instead of going to his chamber; in that moment he wished to shun even the gaze of hirelings—in that moment, ere he read what the hand

now lifeless had written, he felt he must have about him the fresh clear air of morning. For,

Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
The fatal shadows which walk by us still;

and already the doom, wrought by his own sin, was following in his trail.

He walked onward in the solemn stillness of that early day, fresh from the lascivious sweetness of a guilty love, and the furious delight of a brutal vengeance,—walked onward through the warm white mists of the morning, through silent solitudes of woodland, crushing the packet in his grasp unread, until the rapid rush of the river at his feet arresting his course made him note whither he went. Then he paused, and wrenched open the letter of the man who had fallen by his hand.

And what he read was this :

“YOUR OWN ACT has made more words between us impossible ; to a blow there can be but one answer. But I write this in the hazard that in a few hours I may have ceased to live ; when I am dead you may hear without dishonour to me that you have wronged me from first to last. Were it alone for the sake of our past friendship, I would not let you go through life holding me the liar and betrayer you now do ; it were to debase and pollute all mankind, in my person, and in your sight. What you believe I see plainly, how you were duped to believe it I can conjecture

well enough; it is sufficient that by your belief you do me the foulest wrong that ever a lie worked. It is she who betrayed you, not I. I loved her—true! with that vile passion which levels us to brutes; but, before God, Strathmore, I write my oath to you that to that love I never yielded; it was she who tempted, I who resisted. In this must lie the root of the revenge upon myself which she now takes in goading and duping your jealousy, till you believe you see in me a rival who would have treacherously supplanted you. Last night, in warning you of Marion Vavasour's inconstancy, I spoke no slander as you thought; when you taunted me for proof, I could have given it you on the word of one who, as you well know, never lied. Only a few moments before I had been alone with her, when the Duc left, in the supper-room; alone, with no shield between my hateful passion, that sprang up unawares, ripe as it was rank, and her own loveliness, that lured me with glances, with smiles, with hinted words, with every devilish divine temptation. . . . My God! you know the snare—you succumbed to it. Pity me, forgive me, if, for an instant, I almost forgot all bonds of honour to you; if, for an instant, I fell so low as to remember nothing save that her eyes wooed my love and confessed her own—save, that what I loathed while I coveted it, might be mine at my will. Pity me, forgive me, you who know her accursed sorceress beguilings, her subtle tempting that lies in the languor of a glance, in the passing fragrance of her hair! My weakness endured *but* an instant;

then I broke from her while I had strength; I left her while the first whispers of love stole from her lips. At the moment I encountered you; I strove to warn you of the worthlessness of the woman on whose love you staked your life and—fool that I was! when you gibed and taunted me for proof, I shrank from striking you the deadly blow; I chose rather to let you think of me as you would, than force you to own the right by which I spoke, since I must have bought my vindication at such cost to you. Early on the following morning her page brought me a note from Lady Vavasour. I send it to you; it will serve to show you how subtly, how poetically, she shrouds her wanton infidelities, this double-traitress to her lovers and her lord! I wrote her back words that she will never pardon me. Suffice it, that they were such as stripped her amours of their delicate gloss, to show them to her in their own naked light; such as refused her love for your sake, and rebuked her treachery in your name and my own. Out of her presence, and in the calmness of morning, I had strength to do thus much in the right path: God knows I have wandered from it often enough! This is the brief entire truth. My lips never spoke a lie; my hand would scarce write one, when, for aught I know, I may be within an hour of my death. I write it because I could not endure that, throughout your life, you should hold my memory tainted with such thrice-damned treachery as you have attributed to me; and it will spare, rather than inflict on you, added pain, since sooner or later

you must learn that this woman's passion has fled, though her pride of dominion over you still lingers, and you will suffer less to know it thus, than to track it first in the rivalry, and triumph, of some living foe.

"Now let me make you one request in as few words as I can ; for though, after what has passed, I should compel you to meet me were you my brother by blood, I still choose rather to ask this boon of you than of any other. The young girl whom you once saw with me in the elm-walk at White Ladies—perhaps you have forgot the circumstance—was not my mistress, as you naturally thought, but my wife. Three years ago, we met by a strange accident, while I was staying at your house, during your absence. She was the daughter of an exiled Hungarian noble, who had taken refuge near the abbey, in obscurity and poverty. She was in the early grief of her father's recent loss, a mere child in years, singularly lovely, and almost destitute. I loved, and I soon taught her to love. To have offered her dishonour, in her trustful and defenceless innocence, would have *been* dishonour. I married her, but secretly, and have kept it secret even from you, partly for entanglements, that you know hampered me, partly because of my creditors, chiefly because, as you are aware, the knowledge of such a marriage would have ensured my certain disinheritance by Sir Arthur. She has lived at White Ladies, still under her father's name of de Vocqsal, and your almost constant absence on the Continent prevented your hearing whatever rumours might be afloat re-

garding our connexion. She is very dear to me; yet I have but ill recompensed such love as she has borne me. My death will leave Lucille and her child penniless and unprotected; what I would now ask of you is, as far as may lie in your power, to shield her from the bitterness she is so little fitted to brave. This, then, is the trust I leave you, Strathmore; you will let her find in you a sure and faithful friend; you will make to her atonement for the wrong you have done to me; and if her child, now in its infancy, ever live to womanhood, I would wish that in years to come you should speak to her sometimes of her father, but never let her become aware that it is by your hand I fell. Should it be decreed that I die thus, I will not say, 'Know no remorse,' for that were to wish you devil, not man; but I do say to you, believe this, that neither now nor in the most abhorred hours that your mad passion for the wanton adulteress who has parted us, ever caused me, have I felt bitterness to you. 'I would that it had been an open enemy who had done me this dishonour, and not thou, my brother, my guide, my own familiar friend;' but—since thus it has chanced—take my last words as you would take the oath of a dying man. I forgive you fully all that has already passed, all that may yet be to come. If I die, remember—it will be in peace with you.

"BERTIE ERROLL."

This was the message of the dead.

Standing in the morning light, whose reddening sun-rays, streaming on the page, lit up each word till it seemed written in blood, Strathmore read—read on to the last line.

Then a shrill, hoarse cry, shuddering rang through all the forest silence, greeting the early day as it uprose—the cry of a great agony—and throwing his arms above his head, he fell, like a drunken man, down upon the sodden earth.

## CHAPTER V.

“WHOSO HAS SOWN THE WHIRLWIND SHALL BE  
REAPER OF THE STORM.”

MARION VAVASOUR stood on the balcony of her dressing-room looking down on the rose-gardens below, and leaned her white arms upon the bronze scroll-work, and let her Eastern cymar of snowy silk float at will upon the summer wind, and with a sunny laughter sweetly glancing in her eyes gazed at the mists afar off, or downward to where her love-birds were shaking the dew from their wings. Yonder, beneath the roof that was within her sight, where the early sun-rays played about the lips that were sealed to silence, and the eyes which could never more open to their light, lay the dead, slain at her whisper, to sate her revenge;—yonder, under the forest-shadows, whose outline she traced from her rose-hung balcony, a living man wrestled with his agony, his soul tainted with a murderer’s guilt, because her kiss had moved

him to its work, her word aroused him to its hell-born passions. But the knowledge did not cast one shade upon her brow, did not scare away for one brief hour the smile that wantoned on her lips; nay, the knowledge was dear to her, since it was proof and tribute to her power. For in this dazzling delicate creature was the cruelty of the beast of the desert.

The full light of the day, now fully risen for some hours, bathed her in its warmth, whilst clusters of her favourite flowers clung above and below her in their perfumy profusion, till she seemed framed in roses; her floating dress showed all the voluptuous outline of her form; her rich hair lay lightly on her shoulders, glancing in the sun;—and thus, in her proud loveliness, she was seen by the man she had betrayed.

It had been better for her then that death had stricken her in that hour. Woe as her beauty had wrought for others, it had never worked deadlier destruction than that which it now brought herself.

Suddenly, between her and the sunlight, a shadow fell.

She turned, with the gay challenge of her triumphant smile, the silvery folds of her robes sweeping the leaves of the roses till they fell in a fragrant shower; then, for the first time in her shadowless life, the smile faded from off those laughing lips, and the pallor of a ghastly terror blanched the rich bloom from her face. She saw the man whom she had

fooled with the foul simulation of an undying love, and whom her breath, with its traitorous caresses, had wooed to the bottomless depths of crime. And she saw that he knew her aright at last—saw that there are moments in human life which transform men to fiends, leaving them no likeness of themselves; moments in which the bond slave, goaded to insanity, turns and rends his tyrant.

With a spring like a bloodhound's, Strathmore overleapt the barrier which parted them, and caught her in his grasp, bruising the white skin which he had once deemed too fair for the summer winds to breathe on as they blew. And a deadly fear came on her, for she knew that now her voice would have no power to quell the tempest—the voice which had lured him to crime ! She knew that now her loveliness could have no sway to bring him to her feet—the loveliness which was but one fell lie !

As the bloodhound seizes on its prey, his hand crushed her there where she stood; his face was haggard, his eyes were bloodshot, and alight with lurid flame; his hair wet and clotted with the damp sweat of anguish; his dress disordered, and stained with the soil of the earth, and the dews of the morning. Few could have recognised him in the wreck one crime had wrought—one hour worked. In his agony he was mad—I speak it literally—mad; with its hideous riot surging in his brain, and reeling through his blood. And in the sunlight he saw the mocking accursed loveliness, which, even as a fiend

in angel guise, had drawn him on into an abyss of infamy, and stained his soul with the curse of fratricide.

He crushed her in his arms, bruising her white bosom and her delicate limbs ; and his voice, which had lost almost all human sound, broke out with a loud hissing whisper :

“ Traitor—murderess ! I will have life for life ! It is the old Jew law—God’s ordinance ! ”

Through the stillness of the summer morning his laugh rang with horrible mirth, his soul, drunk with one sin, was athirst for more—athirst to trample out this divine and devilish thing which he had worshipped, down into the darkness of the tomb ; to avenge his own betrayal, and the betrayal of the dead, on the woman who had trepanned both, with her wanton’s love, her serpent’s cruelty. His hot breath scorched her face ; his eyes, bright with the light of insanity, glared into her own ; his hands twisted in the shower of her shining hair, that golden web which had meshed him in its toils ; he held her powerless to break away from the worst that he might work, while the fair hues of her face blanched white, and her voice rose in a shriek of abject terror.

“ Oh Heaven ! I shall die—I shall die ! You would not kill me, Strathmore ? ”

Again, in its mirth, his laugh broke out ; he was delirious in his agony.

“ Why not ? Why not, if devils *can* die ? You

have done murderer's work, you shall have a murderer's doom!"

Held in his grip, she could not free herself; clenched there as in a vice of iron, she could not escape from whatsoever he might mete out to her, and in his maddened cheated love, his felon guilt, his tortures of remorse, he knew not what he did; he was brutal and conscienceless as any beast of prey ravening for blood. He only saw, in the burning glare of the mocking sunlight, the beauty which had betrayed him; he only felt the forest-brute's fierce craving thirst for life. And she knew that she was in his power;—she knew that her slave was now her master. Sickening with terror, trembling, quivering, stifled, she wrestled in his grasp, while her voice moaned out a piteous cry:

"Oh, Strathmore! My God!—have mercy, mercy!"

Closer and closer he clenched her in his anguish, her amber hair tangled in his arms, her form pressed in his hold until she moaned with pain, while his laugh rang out again, like Damien's in the torture of the fires:

"I will give you such mercy as you gave:—no other!"

And she knew that death was nigh her now—death from the hands of the man she had fooled, and goaded, and betrayed; in his iron strength her delicate frame was frail as flax which the winds can break in twain, and as helpless to his will. One pressure of

his fingers on her throat, and its breath would be stilled for ever ; one blow from his hand upon her fair veined temples, and the death she had meted out would be her portion.

With all the preternatural strength which is begotten from a ghastly terror, she wrestled and panted in his hold, as the bird in the hand of the snarer ; as easily might she have sought to escape from a vice of steel that had locked her in its jaws, as seek to wrench herself free from the deadly grip of the man whose outraged love made him a fiend, whose vain remorse made him a madman.

A sickness of mortal fear came over her ; a mist blinded her eyes, shutting out the light of day ; a loud noise surged in her ear, and beat about her brain. He only saw in the glaring sun-rays the face which he had worshipped—the face which had lured him to his sin ; he only knew but one brute impulse to crush and trample out this loveliness, where never more could it reproach him—where never more could others gaze upon, and rejoice in, it. She was dying—dying by his hand !—without power to summon all those who lay within her call ; without strength to break from him to where safety, succour, defence were all close, only parted from her by the velvet hangings of her door ! There, without, lay the sunny peopled earth ; here, nigh at hand, was the household which obeyed her lightest word : yet, powerless, voiceless, unprisoned in his grip, she must die, without a sign,

without a cry, like the fawn which is choked by the hound's death-grapple !

And her eyes gazed up to him with a wild appealing pain ;—that look smote his strength like a sudden blow. He had seen it when the sun had set, in the sightless eyes of the dead.

His frame shivered, his limbs grew powerless, his sinews paralysed, his nerves stricken strengthless ; he threw her from him with a sudden cry, hurling her fragile form from his arms, as the winds hurl a broken flower from out their path.

“Death is too much mercy for you ! You shall live to suffer——”

And, leaving her where she lay in her bruised and quivering loveliness, Strathmore reeled out into the scorching sunlight, that seemed to glare upon his sight and scathe his brow like fire—reeled, staggering like a drunken man, his eyes blind, his reason giddy, with the horrible riot of threatening delirium. For on his soul was the curse of Cain.

Marion Vavasour told none of that hour of jeopardy. When he hurled her from him she fell insensible, and her attendants, finding her thus, deemed it a swoon or syncope, and she let the error pass, undisputed. Too much was intertwined with that horrible conflict for her lips to be those which unfolded its story. And on the morrow, when she lay on her delicate couch shrouded in laces, and silks, and cashmeres, her eyes

but the lovelier for the dark circle beneath them, her face but the fairer for its fragile whiteness and the languor of indisposition, Monseigneur le Duc d'Etoiles and Monsignore Villâflor, admitted to her cabinet de toilette, thought they had never beheld her more divine in her most dazzling moments, than in this illness, which she allowed that the tragedy in which her name was involved, had brought on her through its shock and its terror.

“Cecil Strathmore has killed his friend, you know ? It is fearful—it is terrible ! It has shattered all my nerves,” she said, with a delicate shiver of terror, to the prince and the bishop. “That horrible story !—do not talk of it any more, I beseech you—I entreat you, sire. Poor Cecil ! My lord always said he would commit some crime or other some day. They quarrelled about me, you say—perhaps ! But it was *bien bête* if they did. And poor Bertie Erroll was so handsome ! It is such a pity that the Strathmores’ passions were always dangerous !”

And Marion Vavasour sighed, and shuddered again with that delicate *tressaillement*, and stirred her chocolate, and stroked the snowy curls of her lion-dog, and languidly tossed some perfume over her jewelled fingers, and asked what they thought of Scribe’s new comedy and George Sand’s fresh novel ; while Monseigneur and Monsignore each alike congratulated himself that her long unbroken liaison was evidently snapped asunder with this Bois scandal, of which all

Paris was talking, and that its rupture had left a fair field open to all new aspirants.

Remorse was not in her ; she knew it not ; and she was well content that Paris should have nothing else to discourse of, before midnight in the Salons, and after midnight in the Cercles, but this tragedy in the Deer Park, whose fatal end was but sign and seal of her power. Two countries babbled of that Helen-like beauty which drove men to madness—

as when through ripen'd corn,  
By driving winds, the crackling flames are borne.

What mattered it at what price her superb triumphs were won ?

It was but once or twice in solitude that, remembering, with the icy dread of its awful danger shivering afresh through all her veins, the peril of the death which had so nigh encompassed her, she heard again hissing in her ear, with its ghastly laugh, that menace of the future : “Death is too much mercy for you ! You shall *live* to suffer !” It was only then that, vaguely and with a nameless dread, Marion Vavasour, in her glad and glorious omnipotence, feared, with prescient terror, that law inexorable which has written, “Whoso sows the whirlwind, shall be reaper of the storm !”

## CHAPTER VI.

## DIES IRÆ.

THE full sweet light of the summer day fell into the chamber of the dead, where they had lain him down and left him, in the deep stillness that no footfall stirred, no voice disturbed, and no love watched, save that of a little spaniel which had crept into his breast and flew at those who sought to move her from her vigil, and crouched there trembling and moaning piteously.

The sun of another day had risen, waking the earth to its toil and the children to their play; lifting the drooped bells of the closed flowers, and rousing the butterfly to flutter in the light; giving back to the birds their song, to the waters their sparkle, to the blue seas their laughing gleam; bringing to all the world its resurrection from the silence and the gloom of night. But here where the sun fell, touching his cheek to warmth, his hair to gold, it had no spell to

waken : life was left to the insect stirring in the grasses, to the leaf flickering in the wind, to the spider weaving in the sunshine,—but life was robbed from him !

Through the long day the light found its way into the darkened room, and wandered lovingly about the limbs, with their superb and stately stature, which lay powerless and stricken ; and about the face, with its rich, woman-like beauty, where the fair, luxuriant hair was clotted and soiled with the black trail of blood ; and where the grey hue of that Corruption which knows no pity in its theft, no mercy in its march, already was stealing on its ghastly way.

The day was nigh its close when the hired watcher, dully sleeping at his post, started in affright as a voice fell on his ear :

“ Let me pass ! ”

“ Pass ? Not *there* ! ”

“ Yes—*there*. ”

At the reply the man looked up to scan the stranger who sought to enter the chamber of the dead ; and as he saw his face, although it was wholly unfamiliar to him, shuddered at the look it wore, and at the light that glittered in the eyes.

“ Why—why ? ” he faltered. “ What claim have you ? Who are you ? ”

“ I am his murderer ! Stand by ! ”

And at the hideous calmness of the answer the man involuntarily sickened and shuddered and fell back ; and an iron grasp thrust him aside like a cowering

dog, and closed the door upon him and barred him out.

Strathmore was alone with the dead.

And he stood by him, even as in the virgin years of the young world the First Murderer stood beside the brother whom he had slaughtered in his fair and gracious manhood, because the seething madness and the brutal hate of jealousy and vengeance had made a ghastly crime seem sweet and holy in his sight. The sin of Cain was on his soul—and even as Cain heard in the awful silence the voice of God calling on him for the life that he had hurled from earth, so he heard it now, as in his agony he shrieked aloud to the dead to waken, and free him from his curse!—to arise and live again, so that he should not bear this doom through life and through eternity! And his own voice, as it echoed back upon the stillness, left silence as the mocking answer of his prayer, that silence which must for ever stretch betwixt the dead and him.

He shuddered in the sultry warmth of day, like one who shivers in dank, icy waters; and stood looking down upon the white, serene face, and the hair that was blackened with blood, looking, with the dulled, paralysed stupor of remorse.

This man had loved him, had suffered for him, had borne with sacrifice and wrong for his sake, had cleaved to him closer than a brother,—and he had slaughtered him as we slaughter a brute!

Yesterday living, in all the fulness, the strength, the beauty, the rich rejoicing glory of his manhood, and to-day dead—dead!—carion that lay sightless to the sunshine, senseless to all sound, powerless to lift his hand against the feeblest insect that should begin the fell work of the tomb, useless save to be thrust away by hasty hands out of the remembrance of men into the dark and brutal silence of the grave.

Standing there beside him, a terror, such as falls upon men in their own death-hour, when every forgotten sin stands out to damn them, fell upon his murderer; rending asunder the iron of a pitiless nature; striking to dust, as the lightning shivers steel, the unyielding strength which had refused to know remorse, and had gazed with a chill smile upon the agonies of death: smiting down upon his knees, as with the wrath of God, the mortal whose passions had usurped God's judgment and forestalled God's summons, who had dared to mete out life and death as though he were not Man but Deity.

Now for the first hour he realised what he had done:—and struck by it as by a blow, he staggered and fell, his head bowed, his arms stretched out, the dews of a mortal anguish thick upon his brow, his brain on fire with the horrible surging of the blood, that, like a pent-up flood, seemed bursting to break from bondage.

Suddenly in that dread silence where he knelt beside the bier, there arose, joyous and melodious, the evening song of the birds without, where they

fluttered amidst the ilex leaves ; and the tender sound struck on his ear as a knife strikes upon bare quivering nerves. In those frail things, born for a summer's span, which could be crushed by a young child's feeble grasp, the great mystery of Life was left ; and here—here—his hand had shattered it for ever ! A lifetime of remorse could not restore what he had destroyed, and trampled out, in the brute fury of one crime.

That sound broke his stupor, and saved him from madness ; his chest rose and fell as though heaving against bands of steel ; the blood beat and surged about his brain ; the iron of his nature broken asunder, yielded and gave way, and one deep gasping sob quivered in the air as he sank forward, calling in his blind agony on the name of the dead.

There, beside the man whom he had loved and murdered, they found him when, far towards the night, they broke open the barred door—found him lying senseless.

For two months the wise men who gathered about his bed because he had gold and rank, and sought to drive away the retribution which followed a fell crime, with the poor miserable herbs and poisons that their pharmacopœia taught them, held his life in danger, and called his peril by a lengthy name.

More briefly, it was still but the mad beating of the imprisoned blood, which, like the waves of a sea, flooded all the chambers of the mind, already filled with distorted thoughts and abhorred sounds, the off-

spring, not of the fantasia of delirium, but worse—of the memories of guilt. Worse; for the madman, or the fever-stricken, made sane, leaving his bed, leaves far behind him all which turned it into hell; but when the lurking fire in Strathmore's blood had, flame-like, of itself burned down into exhaustion (or, as the wise men better loved to phrase it, when "*they had cured him*"), with him arose every dread shape that had made night horrible and day sickly; and with him they passed out into the world, and mingled with the things of daily life, and followed him—denying him solitude, forbidding him rest. In those awful hours when but one of two issues had seemed inevitable for him—insanity or death—*these* had been ever before him; the Sorceress, with the wanton glamour of her divine loveliness, whose kiss seemed ever scorching on his lips, whose laugh seemed ever mocking on his ear; and the Dead whom he had slaughtered at her bidding, whose dying sigh quivered for ever on the air, and whose face, with the eyes wide open to the light, with their last look of wild appealing pain, for ever was before him.

When he arose and went forth again amongst men, with what seemed to the world, which had thrilled with the horror of his story, an unaltered bearing, an unnatural negligence and calm, these were with him still—spectres of the passion which had betrayed him, of the crime with which his soul was stained. Before the tribunal of God, in the horrors of night and solitude, when none were by to stand between him and

the sin which made his conscience its own hell, between him and the anguish which rioted still for this woman's lost loveliness, his chastisement grew more ghastly with every day which dawned, with every hour that passed. It was like the chastisement of Orestes, followed by those dread shapes which tracked him through his doom, and lay beside him even on the threshold of the altar of God, watching him while he slept, so that his sleep was peaceless; while he waked, so that his day was joyless; while he prayed, so that his prayer was fruitless—those Eumenides which are but type and figure of the Passions.

There are natures which in their anguish seek the fellowship of their kind, as a wounded deer will seek his herd; there are others which shun it, as the stricken eagle soars aloft to die alone, howsoever the blood be dropping from his broken wings. Strathmore's nature, proud, tenacious, unyielding as iron, was the last. Pitiless himself, he abhorred pity, and if he yielded little mercy to misery, he asked none for his own. Therefore the world, when he rose from his bed and entered it once more, marvelled at his heartlessness, and deemed him unchanged, untouched. So the world, great liar though it be, is oftentimes deceived!

Unchanged!—if the iron that has passed through the fire be unchanged after the furnace which has molten it in its scorch till it has bent like a river reed, then was he so: not else. All that was evil in him had leaped up like a lion from his lair, and now could

never more be drugged to sleep ; all of softness which his guilty love had lent his nature had been swept aside in the whirlwind, and its pitiless strength had centred in but one purpose, one desire, one craving : that of vengeance. For his character was one of those in which cruelty is twin-born with suffering, and which, having tasted of crime as the tiger blood, seeks more, and blots out sin by sin. His curse had been born of his vengeance ; yet to crush out his agony he craved vengeance yet again. For this man, who had held himself his own god to mould his destiny at will, who had deemed he ruled his desires under iron curb, and who had looked on in cold disdain while others suffered or rejoiced, indifferent to joy as he was steeled to pain, endured tortures such as weaker, gentler natures never know—let them thank Heaven for their exemption ! However guilty and born of the senses his love had been, he had worshipped to devotion the woman who had betrayed him ; the very air she breathed had been sacred to him ; he had loved her with passionate truth ; he had been jealous of the very winds that played amongst her hair ; he would have staked his life upon her fidelity, even as he did stake his honour and his peace. What marvel that now “the hate wherewith he hated her was yet greater than the love wherewith he had loved her ?” Her hand had hurled him into an abyss of guilt ; her kiss had breathed upon his lips a curse that must for ever lie there ; her tempting had allured and betrayed him into crime, which however the law and the world

freed him from all stain, marked him out for ever in his own sight and in the sight of truth—a murderer.

And go where he would his curse pursued him. In the watches of night it wakened him, and he cried out in its agony with the cold sweat dank upon his brow. In the chill dawn it uprose with him, till the light of day looked hideous, and made him turn from it as from the gaze of an accusing angel. Passing the open doors of church or cathedral it pursued him, for the hot sun seemed streaming down upon the written Law which guards the sanctity of life, and forbids its golden cord to be cut asunder by the hand of man. Amidst the peopled world it haunted him, till the purple wine in his glass looked red with blood, and through the riotous laughter of brilliant revel he heard ever in his ear the piteous shiver of one dying sigh. In the gay glare of gaslight, or in the grey shadows of the twilight, in the rush of crowds or in the stillness of his chamber, he saw the face of the dead; he saw the shudder of the laboured breath, the anguish of the death-spasm, the life-blood winding slowly, slowly, in its dark and slimy trail amidst the grasses, and soaking the fair and trailing hair. Like Cain's had been his crime; like Cain's was now his chastisement. And the brand burned not the less, but the more, upon his soul because it was not written on his brow for men to read.

## CHAPTER VII.

REQUIEM AETERNAM.

IT was a damp, yellow autumn night, with the melancholy sighing of winds through the dense Druidic woods, and white vapours rising from the meres and estuaries to sweep chillily across the sward. A profound silence reigned over White Ladies—a silence in which the “calling of the sea” could be heard from afar off, where the Western Ocean washed its time-worn reefs, and each fall of the yet green leaves trembled audibly through the stillness. And in this silence, complete as that of mountain solitudes, save for the moaning murmur of the restless seas and the weary lulling of the winds as they swept through the pathless forests, a man on foot, and alone, took his way through the woods on an errand that it is rarely given to mortals to fulfil : he went to atone to the Living for a wrong to the Dead. Fool !

We can destroy, but we cannot restore ; and the

soul may labour futilely through the length of weary years, to upbuild, what one brief hour of its passions has sufficed to shatter into dust. Sin ever comes obedient to man's bidding; Expiation, fugitive and fleeting, mocking him, eludes his grasp.

He walked through the gloom of the descending night, with the pale skies above him, and in his hand the dead man's letter. It seemed to him that that which he must say to the one whom he had widowed in her youth would be better said beneath the shroud of night than in the garish day. He went on alone, while at intervals a water-bird started at his step, and the hoot of an owl pierced the silence; went on till he reached the dwelling to which they had directed him, where it stood shut away by forest trees from the lonely road. No living thing was near; the faint bark of a dog baying in the distance the only sound which broke upon the night, while the moon shone fitfully on the dark rustic porch and the lozenge-shaped panes of the casements. The door was slightly open, and since no one answered to his summons, he thrust it farther back and entered; the house seemed empty. There was no light save that of the moon's rays as they strayed in, and of a dim lamp burning above the staircase: the rooms on either side the entrance were deserted, though they bore the trace of recent occupancy, and in one, as the moonbeams fell upon it, he saw the outline of an easel, and the white pages of a book open upon a music-stand. The house appeared forsaken, and he went slowly onward up the stairs,

guided by the little oil-lamp that swung there, and bending his head to avoid the beams of the low ceiling. In a chamber to his left, as he mounted the staircase, he saw the glimmer of light, and followed it; he thought he had mistaken the dwelling, and here might find some who would direct him aright, for he knew but little of the by-roads and homesteads about.

He paused on the threshold of the bed-chamber, and struck lightly on the panels of the door; it was opened by a woman, who looked up at him alarmed and curious at the first moment, then dropped him a lowly reverence as she recognised the lord of the manor.

Strathmore uncovered his head and slightly advanced.

“I am Lord Cecil Strathmore. Can I see your mistress?”

She hesitated, and looked uncertain.

“I suppose so, my lord—if so be as you wish——”

“I desire to see her,—now.”

The woman noticed that his voice was hoarse, and seemed to tremble slightly, and, in obedience rather to that sign than to his desire, or his rank, fell back to let him pass into the room.

“Will you walk hither, then, if you please, my lord?”

“Here?”

He followed her, wondering at the place chosen, into the dimly lit bedchamber, that to him looked as

deserted as the rest of the dwelling. The woman preceded him, herself strangely silent and subdued, and drawing aside the muslin curtains of a bed which stood, in foreign mode, in an alcove, motioned him there, without a word, to her side.

At the gesture he paused involuntarily.

“Good God! is she ill?”

The servant looked at him surprised, and her voice sank to a whisper:

“Ill? I thought your lordship knew she died at dawn to-day?”

“*Died!*”

The word rattled in his throat, he staggered back against the wall, and leaned there, his face covered, his breath thick and laboured: another life lay heavy on his soul!

“A few weeks ago, my lord,” went on the woman, while her voice faltered and grew thick with tears, “a letter came from Paris—leastways, it was that post-mark—with a strange writing on the envelope, and inside of it another letter from Major Erroll. Mademoiselle Lucille read the note from my master first, and as she read her face grew scared and awful, with a piteous look in her eyes, like a lamb’s they’re leading to slaughter. She seized the letter it had come in, and her eyes had scarce fell on it before she gave a cry like a death-cry, my lord, and sunk down, all cold and senseless and crouched together.”

The woman’s voice stopped with a low gasping sob.

“We did all we could, my lord—indeed we did;

but the minute the doctor see her, he said as there was no hope; that a sudden shock had shattered her brain, and that the cruelest thing to wish for her was life. Oh, my lord! and so young as she was! She never knew any one of us again, not even the child, but lay there, weeks through, with no sense or sight in her beautiful eyes. She sank slowly of sheer exhaustion, fading off like a flower. And, at length, at sunrise this morning she died. I suppose your lordship will know what has chanced to my master? His letter that she held clenched in her hand, the doctor took and locked up with other papers, but that in the strange handwriting was left, and I made bold to read it. It came from a gentleman, who wrote that Major Erroll had been shot in some duel at Paris, and had bade him as wrote it enclose that letter to Mademoiselle Lucille if he fell. I know nothing else, my lord; I only know that the news killed my mistress."

She ceased; and each of her homely words struck like steel to the heart of her hearer, staining his soul with the guilt of two lives blotted out by his hand from the Living.

### DEAD!

Had he known her and loved her well, the word could scarce have echoed more hideously in his ears than now, when it met him on the threshold mocking the atonement that he came to offer, and striking paralysed and powerless the soul which, in its presumption, had thought to strike the balance with its sin, and cover crime by costless expiation. DEAD!

He leaned against the wall, with his head bowed in silence ; the direst agony that racks men in their hours of bereavement was mercy to the remorse that Strathmore knew.

Then he raised his head slowly and moved towards the couch, whilst the woman turned away so that she did not look upon his face ; she, who only had heard of his close friendship with the dead man, thought he was moved by grief at his friend's loss, and his rank made his sorrow sacred and unapproachable in her eyes. He drew near the bed, impelled by some resistless impulse to look on the work that he had wrought, urged by that strange self-chastisement which forces us to drink to the uttermost dregs from the cup of retribution. The pale lamp-light fell on the white and delicate couch, fit bier and pall for the early youth thus early smitten to the tomb, and on the bed she lay—dead in the opening summer of her life—dead like a lily rudely broken in its bloom. The love faithful in life was faithful unto death ; she had gone to rejoin her husband !

The lifeless form lay there in its ethereal and solemn loveliness, her hands lightly folded on her breast, her eyes closed as though in slumber, bearing no sign of the destroying hand, save in the hue that blanched the lips, on which, even now, a sigh seemed set, a voiceless prayer suspended. And in strange contrast with her mother's mournful and motionless repose, her head pillow'd on the heart that had no throb for her, her brow resting on the arm that gave

her no embrace, her breath leaving its fresh warmth on the lips that answered her by no caress, was a young child sleeping. Life in its earliest bud, side by side with Life stricken in its fullest bloom ; the light gold locks mingling with the dark unbound waves of her mother's hair, the flushed cheek, with its rose-leaf hue, lying against the one now colourless and cold, the soft and dreamless sleep of childhood beside the chill and hopeless slumber of the tomb.

"The child would not leave her, my lord," whispered the woman. "She sobbed herself to sleep there trying to waken her mother, and I had not the heart to stir her. Poor orphan ! she is but an infant ; scarcely two years old, and a love child ! What will become of her ! "

"Her future shall be my care."

His voice sounded dull and hoarse in his own ear as he answered the brief words ; standing there, the vanity and the mockery of the atonement he had come to offer seemed to rise, and jibe and gibber in his face before the holy hush of death ; and the hand of God seemed stretched to sever him from those whom he had slain, and bid him stand aloof, alone on earth, with no companion save his crime.

He was too late !

TOO LATE !

The words seemed wailing through the air—the eternal requiem of every sin ; and as he stood there, with his head bowed in the faint lamplight of the chamber of death, the young child, waking from her

sleep, stirred as from some joyous dream, and pushed her fair hair from her eyes, and laughed up in innocence and gladness in his face. With an involuntary gesture he spurned her from him as though some accursed thing had crossed his vision :—her lips wore her father's smile.

Stricken by that look as by the sword of an avenging angel, he turned and went out into the silent night ; and in his ear the ceaseless moaning of the distant seas, and the weary cry of the winds, wandering and without rest, followed in his path with one eternal wail—“Too late ! Too late !”

## CHAPTER VIII.

“GOOD AND EVIL AS TWO TWINS CLEAVING  
TOGETHER.”

“YOU drink the bitterness of Remorse? Taste the  
sweetness of Revenge.”

The words stole softly to his ear in the stillness as he paced down the ruined cloisters of the Abbey, breaking in on the far-off lulling of the seas and the hoot of the night-birds near. They pierced so strangely to the secret of his thoughts, broke in so suddenly on the solitude, in which no living thing was near him, that he started and looked up with, for one instant, what in a weaker man might have been akin to superstition. The fitful moonlight, slanting greyly in through the low pointed arches, fell across the figure of a woman leaning against the moss-grown pillar of the cloister-side; and in the dress, worn something as Arabs wear their garments, with the vivid colours which marked her tribe, and in the pro-

found melancholy of the Sclavonian features, he recognised the Bohemian Redempta, who thus crossed his path for the third time like some fixed recurrent fate.

His steps were involuntarily arrested, and he paused, looking at her in the moonlight, whilst her gaze steadily met his, without boldness yet without fear, with something compassionate in its mournful fixity; and as she moved forward where a brighter streak of the moon-rays fell, he saw that the olive-bronze of her cheek had paled, and that her deep-set eyes were lit with a luminous gleam.

“Well!” she said, slowly, “does the kiss burn like poison now? Was sin born of the love, and a crime of the sin, and a bitter curse of the crime? Were the words of Redempta aright?”

He flung her out of his path with unconscious violence; the passions that were at work within him made this mocking travesty of them seem scarce so much insult as jibe.

“Out of my way, woman—devil—whichever you are!”

“More devil than woman, for, like you, I hate!”

The answer came slowly and bitterly from her lips with menacing meaning; the ferocity of his grasp and his words seemed to have swept unnoticed over her, and to have stirred her no more than the sweep of the forest wind past her cheek. Her intonation caught his ear, and he turned and looked more closely at her features, on which were written the dark passions of

the Sclavonic character, masked by that melancholy composure natural to the Eastern blood which mingled in her veins. He saw that this woman's words were not the offspring of charlatany if they might be those of a maniac's wanderings, and he paused, instinctively drawn by the fate which seemed to have interwoven her knowledge and her actions with his own.

Of that moment's pause she seized advantage, and leaned towards him, changing her slow and imperfect English for her own swift, mellow Czeschen.

"Listen! You are an English noble, rich and full of power—I a wandering Czec, whom your laws call a tramp and your scorn calls a vagrant, and yet—yet—listen! I, the daughter of Phara, the gipsy, can give you what your wealth cannot buy nor your power command—I can give you your vengeance!"

By the faint yellow light she saw in his eyes rise the steel-like glitter of his dangerous wrath as he thrust her back.

"You are mad, or an impostor! Let me pass, woman! I am in no mood for fooling!"

A smile bitter as his own crossed her face, and she did not move from his path.

"Am I? Look in my face and see! Listen first, my lord, ere you judge! If the words of Redempta were error that she spoke to you long ago in Bohemia, then say she speaks falsely now;—if you did not find, as she foretold to you a brief while since in France, that your love, changed to hatred, will know no rest for its throes till it is slaked in revenge, then believe

that she lies to you now. But if you found these things true, then judge her by them : as true is her hatred for her whom you hate, as sure is her power to point you your vengeance. Say ! were they truth or error ? Say ! ”

She waited for his answer, and he was silent, where she stood fronting him in the dim moonlight of the ruined cloister ; a bitter wrath was in his eyes, a haughty menace on his lips, but the melodious appealing voice of the Bohemian carried its own conviction, and in a measure disarmed his anger ; her words struck too closely home to the curse he bore within him to be heard idly or with scorn, and the soul of this man, in whom much that was great commingled with dark and evil crimes, was too instinctively true to itself and to others to sully itself by a lie even to a beggar. She saw the advantage gained, and pursued it, her voice growing swifter, and sunk to a whisper, whilst the untutored poetry of her natural speech lent dignity, almost solemnity, to the Bohemian tongue in which she spoke.

“ They were truth !—and you have known their bitterness. Listen, then ! I have followed you here to your own country to be heard, for what you vainly seek I can point out, what I vainly crave you can work. Listen ! The worm burrows, where the tiger cannot reach ; the tiger tears and rends to death, where the worm would be trampled and crushed under foot ; let them both work together ! Will you hold your revenge in your own grasp, to let its blow

fall, slowly, surely, sharply, at what hour you will?—will you shatter the jewels from her breast, the smile from her lips, the laughter from her eyes, the world from her feet?—will you hold her fate in your grip, meting it out at your will, crushing all that wanton loveliness which has betrayed you, as you might crush this velvet-painted moth in your hand? If you will, then, my lord, listen to the words of Redempta, who, though ahungered and athirst, a wanderer on the earth, without home or people, poor, and stricken, and desolate, will ask no reward of you save one—one!—*to see her suffer!*"

Her voice sank lower and lower, stealing out in the hushed night with a terrible and ghastly meaning; her hand clenched unconsciously upon his arm, her eyes gleamed with a lurid thirsty light, and the immutable and melancholy calm that veiled her features, as it veils the faces of the Easterns beneath the throes of strong emotion, only lent but a more deadly strength to the last words than the wildest curse of passion could have carried with them. To doubt her was no longer possible; and he answered her nothing where they stood in the sickly autumn moonlight, the air around them filled with the faint and mournful southing of the sea, and the lull of the winds among the cloisters of the dead Dominicans.

*"To see her suffer!"*

It was the lust of his own soul—this merciless and brutal longing to draw within his grasp the vile and lovely thing who had been his madness and his curse,

and watch his vengeance work, and fester, and eat its way into her very soul, whilst he stood calmly by, as men in ancient days stood to watch the lovely limbs of women stretched and broken on the rack. For Strathmore, who had been born pitiless, had now become cruel.

The Bohemian was silent also ; she seemed to have lost all memory of his presence or her errand ; and where she leaned against the broken archway, her eyes were vaguely looking onward into the darkening night, and as her hands moved unconsciously over her chain of Egyptian berries, her lips muttered still :

“ *Thou* knowest how I have toiled to keep my oath. Grant me but this—but this ! To see her suffer ere I die—suffer as she made *thee*. Vengeance is righteous ! ”

A smile more evil than the worst curse that ever lodged on human lips, came upon Strathmore’s face where the watery light of the moon fell on it. Having tasted guilt, he had ceased to abhor guilt ; racked by remorse, he still longed for added crime, and the fires that scathed his soul neither chastened nor purged, but only burned what was iron into steel.

“ Righteous ? ” he echoed, while his voice was laboured with the passions roused by this woman’s tempting, but suppressed by her presence. “ No !—it is hellish ! But what matter ? —it is all that is left now ! Answer me, impostor or devil, whichever you be—why do *you* hate ? ”

A weary smile, haggard as grief, crossed her lips for one moment, and a strange softness trembled over all her face.

"Why, why!" she cried, while the melancholy Czeschen words rose plaintively upon the silence. "Why do women ever hate, sorrow, travail, rejoice, lament? Because they love! I loved—I—the vagrant, the gipsy, the fortune-teller, whom delicate women shrink from as from pollution, loved, what she—the aristocrat, the courted darling, the beauty of courts—robbed from me. I loved—oh God! it is not of the *past*. I love still! my beloved, my beloved!"

Her head drooped upon her breast with a low gasping sob, and her form trembled as though she shivered at the wind; then she threw back her head and stood erect with her stag-like gesture, the light glittering flame-like in her eyes, the dark blood burning flame-like on her brow.

"We met in Galicia. He was an Austrian soldier, a noble like yourself, and he found beauty in me, and I loved him, as the chill, pampered, luxurious women of his world never love. I was his toy, but he—he was my god! What others called my shame, was my glory; what others held my sin, was my crown; and I said in my soul, 'I have lived enough, since I have lived to be thus dear to him.' I quitted my tribe to become his mistress; and when Lennartson left the province, and went to Vienna, I followed him—and he loved me still, though where he once gave me days,

he gave me hours. And when he went to Southern France, I forgot my people and my country, and followed him still thither—and still he loved me, though where he once gave me hours, he gave me moments. It is ever so with men's love! And there he saw HER. By night, as I crouched under the myrtle shrubs of her villa to see his shadow, where it fell, I saw him in her gardens; by day, hidden under the pines, watching for his horse's gallop, I saw them riding together. She beguiled him as she beguiled you; he loved her, and he was lost to me for ever! For a while, I know scarcely how long, time was a blank to me. I remember nothing; people who tended me said afterwards that I went mad—it may have been so. The first thing I remember is, when I crawled out and found my way to his house, there was a crowd about—a crowd whispering and awe-stricken; and when I pushed my way through them, I saw him——”

A shiver ran through her frame, and her voice dropped; she waited one instant, then summoned back the proud and mournful calmness with which she spoke:

“I saw him, dead, shot by his own hand . . . . and those about him were saying how she had laughed and taunted him the night before, and how, maddened by her, he had left her presence and ended the life that she had made worthless. She had slain him!—and when they told her she felt no remorse for her work, but went to a ball in her diamonds and her loveliness with a laugh on her lips. And by his corpse,

when it lay there, torn, pale, its beauty shattered, and its glory stricken, I took my oath to God and him to know no rest until I had revenged him!"

She paused again ; and in the silence between them there sounded the melancholy lulling of the ocean like the endless ebb and flow of human passions, ever renewing, never at rest. Then her chanting and melodious tones took up their burden once more :

"And I have kept my vow. I joined my own people again ; but, unseen, undreamt of by her, I have followed in her track, groping in the dark for some dropped clue, some broken thread to guide me to the redemption of my oath. She never saw me save once, when she bade her hireling strike me out of her path like a dog ; yet I never let her escape me, but followed ever in her shadow, as her doom should follow a murderer. Oftentimes my errand seemed hopeless, and I said in my heart, 'Fool ! can the field-lark cope with the falcon ? can the emmet destroy the gazelle ?—how then canst thou reach her ?' Yet ever again I took patience and courage, since ever in my ear his voice seemed crying, 'Revenge ! revenge !' and when my soul fainted because of the weariness of its travail, I thought of him as I had beheld him, driven to his death by her, with his beautiful face shattered and ghastly, and bathed in its blood ! Then I gathered my strength afresh, and afresh pursued her, blindly, but yet in security, for I believed that the hour would come when the God of Vengeance at length would deliver her into my hand. And lo ! the

hour at last is here. Yet now that I have the knowledge my power is too weak to turn it against her. I, poor and lowly, and whose voice would never be heard, cannot use what I have found. But you, English lord, can do with it what you will. I, the Vagrant, and you, the Noble, both hate ; let the great take the key to his vengeance from the obscure. The worm has burrowed, let the tiger rend !”

Her voice ceased, and there was silence again between them, whilst the winds swept with hollow echo through the arched cloisters where they stood, these strange companions thus strangely drawn together, with the great chasm of social difference yawning between them, only bridged by the community of hatred, which, like the community of love, binds together those who are farthest asunder. He had heard her throughout without interruption, and as the moonlight fell about him she saw the varied passions that swept across his face, and the tiger glare darkening his eyes. As dried wood ready for the burning leaps up to the touch of flame, so the lust of revenge which was within him leapt up to the woman’s words,

“ *To see her suffer!*”

He, too, was athirst for it. All that was evil and merciless latent in his nature—and there was very much—had fastened on one desire : to wreak the fulness of some hideous revenge where he had blindly doted. And he stood now silent, while many thoughts

coursed through his brain, larvæ of evil which the hotbed of remorse was swiftly nourishing to deed.

A profound and rapid reader of human character and motive, this woman's soul was bare before him as a book, and in it he read—truth. Her history brought back to him that which had once been told him at Vernonceaux of Marc Lennartson's death and of its cause, and he saw that the heart of the Bohemian, untamed and untutored, knowing no god but its love, and no heaven but its hate, would make no erring flight to the quarry of its vengeance. He saw that this woman held, or believed she held, the key to the redemption of her oath ; and he saw that, weak with her sex's tenderness, yet thereby strong as her sex ever is, ignorant, and malleable as wax in his guidance, yet with the tenacity of an Indian in tracking the trail she followed, she would be his tool to work as he would.

For one moment he paused ; the pride of rank and of habitual reserve, rather, perchance, than any nobler principle, shrinking from association with the Gitâna, rejecting the employment of one thus far beneath him, loathing his instrument because he must make it even with himself if he once stooped to use it. That moment passed ; then he motioned her from him :

"I will hear you ; follow me."

And she followed him in silence down the cloister as he went onwards to the entrance of the Abbey, which stood out, a grey, sombre, stately pile, in the

moonlight that was shining white upon its delicate fretwork and its pointed windows, and leaving deep in shadow its masses of Norman stone and battled wall shrouded in their vast elm-forests.

An hour afterwards the dark figure of the Bohemian moved swiftly and silently across the park of White Ladies, taking the road which led to the little hamlet beyond the gates, and at the window of the library where his audience had been given to this strange, un-fitting guest, Strathmore stood leaning out to catch the coolness of the autumn night—fire seemed on his brain, fire in his blood, for the hatred of men of his race had ever outweighed and outstripped the sweetness and the madness of their love. And as a sleuth-hound scents the trail of what he would hunt downward to its death, so he now saw shadowed out before him the sure track of a deadly vengeance.

Here, beneath the roof of the Dominican Abbey, which once had sheltered both, both seemed beside him: the woman who had betrayed him, the man whom he had slain. The sweat of a great horror gathered thick upon his brow—flee where he would these must ever pursue him, wander where he would for ever on his lips must burn the delicious lie of her guilty kiss, for ever in his path must rise the spectre of that death-agony which he had gazed on with a smile. For Conscience is God; and hide us where we will, it tracks us out, and we must look whither it bids, we must listen to that which it utters, we must behold

that which it brings, in the reeling revel as in the silent dawn, in the dull stupor of sleep as in the riotous din of orgies;—from its pursuit there is no escape, from its tribunal there is no appeal.

And where he stood, while through the silence there seemed to echo the mocking music of Marion Vavasour's sweet, accursed laugh, and down the hush of night there seemed to tremble the dying sigh of him whom he had murdered at her bidding, good and evil strove together in his heart; the remorse that should have purified like fire, and the hatred which, like fire, would destroy.

Atonement!—his soul hungered for it. It had been shattered from his hand to-night; yet, later on, it might be wrested back. If he gathered, by his will and by his wealth, about the young child whom he had orphaned, all that earth can know of gladness, shelter, riches, tenderness; if, for her father's sake, and in her father's trust, he made her future cloudless as the life of the flower which but opens to the light to rejoice through the sunny length of a fair summer day, and made her lips only speak his name in gratitude and blessing, the sin might be atoned? He had loved the man whom he had brutally slain: through the young life given by the dead, should expiation to the dead be wrought.

Expiation to the dead;—but to the living Vengeance.

The lust for it was in his blood as strong as at that hour when his hand had been upon her throat, her life

within his grasp:—and the power of vengeance lay now within his grip. “*To see her suffer*”—suffer, and plead for mercy, and be denied, even as she had denied it, and find her loveliness of no avail to shield her from the doom of an unerring and a pitiless fate! For this his soul was athirst; to its purpose his life was set; he saw it looming through the darkness of the future; the pursuit in which his speed would never slacken, in whose success his will would never relent.

In this hour, when he stood alone in the autumn night, with no companion save the distant lulling of the weary seas; of his remorse was begotten his atonement, of his hatred his revenge.

Twin-born, must not one strangle the other in the birth? Or, twin-nurtured into strength and life, could both prosper side by side?

## CHAPTER IX.

THE FRAIL ARGOSY WHICH WAS FREIGHTED WITH  
ATONEMENT.

FOR a year Strathmore was not seen in Europe.

Rumour, which must always lie rather than keep silence, babbled now and again remembrance of him ; he had been seen in Thebes ; he had been met on the Amazon, or the Ganges ; he had been heard of as dwelling at Damascus, and studying the buried learning of the East ; he had been slain in a midnight fray with dragomans close by the Gates of the Kings in Egypt ; these were among the things that Rumour babbled of him, and that Rumour lied, for none were true. Those who knew him best deemed that he shunned the world, and had sought solitude ; and these also erred. For Strathmore was of a nature which masked anguish with an iron strength and an impassive calm, and to which the artificial atmosphere, the feverish crowds, the profound ambitions of the

great world, were the necessities of existence ; of the air of the mountain and the valley he had ever wearied ; his breath was the breath of cities. Whatever of returning peace the eternal calm of mountains and the freshness of trackless forests may lend to the man whom the world has wronged, they have none for the man self-doomed by a self-chosen guilt. *Now* solitude was abhorrent to him—to be alone with Nature, man must be at peace with Himself.

Solitude ! while over the still, starlit, pathless ocean in the hush of night there seemed to steal the quiver of that dying sigh. . Solitude ! while the crimson glare of the desert sunlight, streaming from the brazen skies, seemed reddened with the blood that he had shed. Solitude ! while in the fairest fall of the tropic night, there seemed to look into his those dying eyes with their look of blind, beseeching pain. *His* solitude was a hell.

Yet for a year he was absent from Europe, and though many babbled of him, none truly saw him, or knew whither he had gone. He was absent for a year. For he held, what had been ever the creed of those of his blood, that vengeance accomplished, is crime acquitted, and remorse dulled.

And patiently and ruthlessly as the sleuth-hound follows in the trail of its prey, he followed the track of his revenge. For his own agony had not taught him mercy, and in pursuit this man was untiring and inexorable.

In the betrayal of his love he had suffered enough

to have chastened his sin to its full due; the most rigid moralist might have compassionated him beneath the tortures of his guilt-stained passion. It had not been *love* with Strathmore, it had been worship—blind and insensate, if you will; but one into which his whole being had been absorbed, which had cast down unheeding every sacrifice at her feet, which would have died for her, content if his last breath had been spent upon her lips, and which had laid waste his life as no merely sensual passion could have ever done, when he had learned that his love had betrayed him, her fealty forsaken him, that her kiss, her sigh, her smile, her loveliness were divine lies, as free to all the world as to himself! The hate wherewith he hated her was as mighty, therefore, as the love wherewith he loved her. Born with that certain taint of cruelty which often belongs to a character in which desire of power is dominant, and which an imperious, negligent egotism renders indifferent to all not touching on itself, the latent trait hitherto negative or dormant, rose under the pressure of maddened passion and grief, into an accursed thirst for retaliation. Ere this he would not have inflicted pain save when compelled to do so to clear his path, or to advance an aim; now, the germ grown into a tree, the seed sprung to a disease, the passive quality that had lain in his nature, grew active, inflexibility ripened into cruelty, and he set himself with pitiless purpose to work such ruin as he should watch and taste and prolong to slow protracted pain, and deal out as

though his hand and his will had but to wield the iron flail of destiny.

Blindly as Othello had he worshipped what he loved; ruthlessly as Othello he now longed to crush her out with his own hand where none could gaze on the loveliness which had betrayed him; for there is no cruelty with which passion has not been allied; there is no vengeance so remorseless as that which has its birth in love that has turned to hate. And although his nature had been bowed and bent under the weight of its agony, as steel in the forging and the flame of the furnace, it had but grown like the steel in the ordeal, the keener to strike, the surer to slay. Because a ceaseless remorse ate like fire into his soul, he clung but the closer to his vengeance; because an anguish of regret smote his strength till it sickened and reeled in the torture of his lonely hours, he reared that strength but the higher, to gather afresh the reins of fate into his grasp, and build up with his own hand the structures of expiation and of chastisement.

Strathmore, great in much, weak in much, and guilty in far more, was very human; for human nature, with many touches of deity in it, has yet far more of devil, and is a tree of which

sed quantum vertice ad auras  
Ætherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit.

And of the few boughs which stretch to heaven, how many fibres strike to hell!

Where the Atlantic waves wash on the western

shore, and the headlands are clad with ivy and trailing honeysuckle ; where the white surf foams up on the ribbed pearly sands, and in the shadows of the hollowed rocks, ever sounds from dawn to sunset the delicate music of birds' voices mingling with the murmur of the seas ; there was sheltered the young life which Strathmore's crime had orphaned in its opening. It was a fitting place for childhood to grow up in, free as the winds which swept over the ocean, joyous as the white-winged sea-birds which cleft their path through the sunlight ;—this place on the western seaboard, with the melody of its waves echoing through the day and night, with its warm breezes blowing over golden gorse and purple heather, with its snowy breakers dashing on the rocks, and with its broad blue waters tossing seaweed in the light of a summer's noon.

There, where the boughs of the trees drooped almost to the edge of the sheltered sunny bay in St. George's Channel, and through the opened windows on a summer dawn came the voices of the fishermen, and the sound of the sea, and the piping of the waking birds, dreamily mingled in one pleasant music, lived the one who filled her dead parent's place to Erroll's young child—Lady Castlemere. Although he had given to her but negligent regard, a cold ceremonial of attachment, Strathmore's mother had loved him, not in his childhood or his youth, for she had then been a political leader absorbed in her great party, but proudly and warmly now that she followed his career

from her solitude by the western shores, whither she had gone when age and delicacy of health had made the great world distasteful, and had softened that haughty chillness which came with her Norman blood. A stately and noble woman still, with that which had been unyielding in her nature rendered touchingly gentle under the hand of Time, which mellows whilst it destroys, she left the proud station of Marchioness of Castlemere to her elder son's wife, and merged her own ambitions into those of Strathmore, whom she saw seldom, but of whom the world told her much. She had bitterly mourned when she heard of the slavery into which a woman's beauty had fettered him, and had shuddered aghast at that deadly tragedy which the world passed over with a light forgiving name. But in his guilt she loved him more truly, perhaps, than she had ever done; and in his guilt his thoughts turned to her.

It was his mother to whom he had delegated, and who had accepted that trust which the death of the wife had rendered it alone possible to fulfil to the child; and in proportion to the remorse which gnawed to his heart's core with every remembrance of the man whom he had murdered, was his almost morbid craving to fulfil to its uttermost breadth and depth that which he looked on as a request to be obeyed sacredly and unceasingly, as the sole atonement that lay in his power to render to the dead.

If you have once known what it is to recal, in a too late repentance, cruel words spoken, harsh thoughts

uttered, to one whom you loved well and who has gone from you for ever beyond hearing of your prayer ; and to lavish your care—in your poor miserable futile longing for some atonement, or cleaving to some relic of, the dead—on horse, or dog, or flower that he or she had treasured, then you know in some faint shadow of its bitterness that which he now felt ; that on which he now acted.

The heart of his mother yearned to him in his crime and his remorse. For his sake, and at his wish, she accepted the guardianship of Erroll's young child : he coupled it with the condition—first, that the child as she grew up should be taught to look upon him as her friend and guardian, and, again, that she should *never be told her father's name*. So, alone, could none unfold to her the history of her father's death ; so, alone, could she grow up ignorant that the hand which fostered and sheltered her was stained with her father's blood.

It was easy to accomplish this. Erroll's marriage had been known to none ; the clergyman of the obscure village where the ceremony had been performed was dead ; his wife had still borne her maiden name ; the servants, the doctor, and the vicar at White Ladies had looked on the offspring of their union as a "love-child," and there were no others who even knew of her birth. Accordingly, when the young Lucille was secretly removed and placed with Lady Castlemere, under her mother's Hungarian name, as an orphan whom she had adopted, and to

whom her son had been appointed guardian, into a matter of so little moment none inquired, and his mother's protection of her excluded any coarser supposition as to Strathmore's relationship to her, which, under other circumstances, might have been mooted, to her disadvantage in later years. On her he settled, independently of himself, a considerable sum, more than sufficient for all needs of her nurture and education, and, in the case of his death, provided that she should inherit largely of his wealth. He desired that if she grew to womanhood she should hold his name in love and gratitude, ignorant of the heritage of wrong she owed to him; he longed that there should be one innocent life on earth unaware of the guilt which lay upon his soul. And here, too, the will of the dead strengthened and sanctioned his own: Erroll had written, "Never let her know that it was by your hand I fell." A wish of his was now more sacred to the one who had slain him, than all the laws of God and Man which he had broken!

The arrangements with his mother had been all made before he quitted England, and the child had been a year in the dower-house of Silver-rest, happy as a joyous childhood ever is from the sunrise of its careless, cloudless days to the sunset of its peaceful, dreamless nights; happy with the seaweeds for her treasures, and the yellow gorse for her wealth, and the hushing of the seas for her slumber-song, yet—it might have been whimsically fancied—with the regret of her mother's loss vaguely told in the wistful

gaze of her fair eyes, and the shadow of her father's dark and early doom left in the touching and unconscious sadness, which stole like a fate over her young face in sleep or in repose.

She had been there a year, when, in the close of the summer, Strathmore's yacht, *Sea Foam*, bringing him, as most believed, from the trackless forests and buried cities of Mexico, came to anchor in the little western bay, after her long run across the Atlantic, before she went down Channel. He landed, and went on alone to Silver-rest in the morning light. Far as the eye could reach stretched the deep still waters of the bay; the white sails of his yacht and of the few fishing skiffs in the offing stood out distinct and glancing in the sun; over the bluffs and in all the clefts of rock the growing grass blew and flickered in the breeze; and as he crossed the sands the air was fragrant with the scent of wild flowers that grew down to the water's edge.

But to note these things a man must be in unison with the world; to love them he must be in unison with himself. Strathmore scarce saw them as he went onward; all that he beheld was the Future and the Past, the vengeance which should stand in the stead to him of all that he had forfeited, and the crime which gnawed unceasingly at his heart, as the vulture at the living entrails of the doomed. Outwardly, he was unchanged: the cold, urbane manner, the chill, keen brilliance natural to him were unaltered; he was a courtier and a man of the world;

for twenty years to come he would not change perceptibly ; but in character he had altered much ; or rather—to speak more truly—his nature had leapt up from its repose like a lion from its sleep. An agony of repentance had shaken his soul to the dust, rousing it for ever from the calm egotism in which he had bade it lie ; a guilty passion had swept over his life like a whirlwind, smiting from his hands for ever the curb with which he had boasted, god-like, to rein his passions at his will. The temple which he had built to himself had been riven to the ground by the thunderbolts of the storm : a holier from its ruins might yet have arisen, but that with his own hands he chose to fashion the twin structures of Retribution and Expiation. Briefly, Strathmore had grown at once more sensitive and more dangerous, and though the whole creed of his pride had been scattered, like leaves before the wind, before the test of a great temptation, though the strength which had haughtily held all human error aloof and in disdain, had succumbed to the first attack of passion, and had wrought a foul crime as calmly as a righteous act, Strathmore never altered in this : life was still to be moulded by *his* will, and by *his* decree he held still that he should rule fate even as Deity ! Alas !

Evil or good may be better, or worse,  
In the human heart, but the mixture of each  
Is a marvel and a curse !

This is the widest truth in human life, but it is one little remembered among men.

He went this morning where, in his yearning love for the man whose blood was on his hands, he had centred his sole chance and choice of expiation on the frail life of a young child. As he walked onward over the wet smooth sand he came into a sheltered semicircle in the rocks, part of the grounds of Silver-rest, where the trailing plants were thick and odorous, forming a hanging screen of flowers, through which the sun-rays played upon the pools, and on the boulders that glowed deep red where the water had splashed them wet; and here he stopped, for lying on the wild ivy full length, with two setters beside him, he saw a boy of some ten years old, Lionel Caryll, the son of one of his sisters by an ill-fated mésalliance, who, early left an orphan, had always been brought up by Lady Castlemere.

The boy started, rose, and stood shyly silent; he had seen but little of Strathmore, and of that little he was afraid. He was a handsome child of the Saxon type, with a fair, tanned skin, and a mane of fair, tangled hair. Strathmore put out his hand carelessly to him; he disliked and never noticed children.

“How are you, Nello?”

The boy, shy still, did not answer, and Strathmore passed onward, putting aside a quantity of creepers which, hanging from the shelf of rock above, obstructed his progress. But the boy sprang forward with an eager gesture:

“Stop! please—pray! you will wake her!”

“Wake what?”

“Wake *her*!—and she was so tired.”

Strathmore instinctively looked down, deeming that the boy’s care referred to some pet setter or retriever.

Amongst the long grass under the ledge of rock, with the sunlight streaming fitfully through the leaves upon her, with her arms above her head, and her limbs lying in the pliant, unconscious grace of childhood and of sleep, there at his feet lay the child he had last seen at the death-bed of her mother. Her clasped hands held a long trail of ivy, her fair hair was wreathed in with a childish crown of wood violets, and her face was turned towards him with the dark lashes resting on its warm, flushed cheeks, and in its loveliness, still almost that of infancy, the shadow of that unconscious sadness which seemed like the shadow of her father’s fate; a presage, or a heritage, of woe.

Strathmore paused, and a shudder ran through his frame; again this young child, in her innocent sleep, seemed to him as his worst accuser, seemed to him at once her father’s phantom and avenger; and again this time, as she slept, the smile that smote him to the heart parted her lips and passed over her face, the smile that he had seen so often on the lips of the Dead.

Lionel Caryll looked at him, awed and terrified, he barely knew why:

“Are you ill?” the boy asked timidly.

Strathmore signed him away:

"Yes—no. Go on and tell my mother I am here, Nello. I will follow."

The boy hesitated, and looked at the sleeping child who had been his companion in play.

"Will you take care of Lucille?"

Accustomed to deference, and intolerant of opposition, Strathmore signed him away:

"Go, and do as I bade you."

The boy wavered, looking wistfully at his companion, and doubtfully at Strathmore; then, instinctively compelled to obedience, he went like a greyhound over the sands, followed by his setters. Strathmore was left alone with the remorse which an infant's smile had sufficed to waken into all its anguish—such is the coward doom of Crime.

He stood in solitude, with the sound of the seas about him, and at his feet the sleeping child, with the violets tangled in her fair, floating hair; and as he looked on her young loveliness, which, so different yet so similar, bore so strange a likeness of her father's face, memories thronged upon him, starting from the haze of long forgotten years, and gathering around him, even as the pursuant Shapes gathered about the Slayer in Hellas, till the air, which was clear to the sinless, grew, to the accursed, darkened and crowded with their thronging, shadowy forms. He remembered Erroll, a young child, even as this, with the same fair, trailing hair, and the same smile like sunshine on his lips; he heard his fresh, glad laugh ring on the summer air; he heard his childish

voice echo upon his ear ; he felt the touch of his young hand ; he lived again in those years that had long drifted by, forgotten in the whirl of years more evil, when in his own soul there was no sin, when the man whom he had murdered played beside him in the sunlight, when his life was guiltless as that on which he now looked, where it lay sleeping at his feet !

And a bitter cry broke from him where he stood on the solitary shore :

“ My friend ! My brother ! ”

Back upon his ear the echo of the rocks around wailed in return his own yearning, futile anguish, like a prayer fruitless and rejected of Heaven.

In the sunny stillness of the noon Strathmore bowed down his head upon his hands, and his frame shook with the throes of the remorse which could not force back the sealed portals of the grave, which could not call to earth the existence one fleeting instant had been sufficient to destroy. He could not have told how long he had sat there in the solitude, where every stirring pulse of life, from the noiseless rush of the sea-birds' wings to the faint shouts of the fishermen across the bay, seemed like the voice of God calling upon him to answer for the life he had hurled into the grave ; moments might have passed, or hours, when he was roused by the silken touch of hair against his hand, and a voice which whispered softly in his ear :

“ You are not happy ! — tell Lucille ! ”

He started and looked up ; the young child,

awakened from her sleep, had come to him, and vaguely grieving for the grief she could not comprehend, as spaniels do at sight of human pain, was blindly striving, as a spaniel might, to comfort him. Losing fear of a stranger in her child's compassion, she had drawn close to him, so that her bright hair swept over his hands, and in her large soft eyes stood tears half of terror half of pity for the suffering which she saw and vaguely felt, with answering pain, as the spaniel the sorrow of which he nothing knows. And her young voice, tremulous but tenderly caressing, murmured in his ear, "Lucille is sorry for you—do tell Lucille?"

With a gesture as though a serpent had stung him, Strathmore started, flung her off, and quivered like a man who has been struck a death-blow.

"Child, child! hate me, curse me, reproach me, but—oh, God!—do not pity me! Keep off; my hands are red with his blood, *yours* must not touch them!"

The wild words died inarticulate in his throat, and his teeth clenched as the anguish she had strung to torture rent and tore his frame—the worst chastisement from the hands of man would have been mercy to the reproach of those innocent words which *pitiéd him*; to the unconscious accusation of those uplifted eyes gazing with a child's tender yet wondering compassion on the face of her father's murderer!

She stood apart awed and silent, the tears standing in her eyes, that were at all times wistful with a

haunting, beseeching sadness; the fierce gesture which had flung her off she understood, the words she did not, they were unintelligible—indeed, unheard—but she waited, pale to her lips, and trembling like a young fawn after a cruel blow, yet drawn by a strange instinct of compassion towards this agony, which she seemed to know was brutal, not to her, but from its own blind pain. She waited, then grown more daring, and taught by those who instilled to her an infinite love for all who suffered, she drew near him again—nearer and nearer, till her hair swept once more on his hand, and a pathetic entreaty trembled in her voice :

“ Speak to me—do speak to me ? Lucille meant no harm.”

Again at her touch and her voice he shrank and shuddered as under physical torture ; this child came with caressing gentleness and plaintive pity to the one whose guilt had orphaned her, and to whose hands she owed the deepest wrong that life can owe to life ! Then he lifted his head and looked at her ; when his resolve was set his strength was iron to bridle himself or to coerce others, and it was his will that she should grow up holding him in love and gratitude, and ignorant ever of the crime which otherwise must stretch, a hideous and impassable gulf, between her and the assassin of her father. He passed his hand lightly over her fair silken hair, and answered gently :

"Lucille is very kind. I thank her. Tell me, you who are so pitiful to pain, are *you* happy?"

"Always."

Her eyes looked their mute surprise that any one could ask her such a question, and a smile played about her lips as she drew a long glad breath, recalling her own exhaustless treasury of joy—the joys born of sea, and bird, and flower, of a crown of forest violets, and a chase of summer butterflies! The joys which are pure, and cost no pang of shame, no purchase-gold of guilt, in their glad reaping!

Strathmore found in the simple answer the first seed of his atonement; it was much to him to learn from the child's fresh, truthful lips that she was "happy"—happy by his means, and in his fulfilment of the trust bequeathed him by the dead. His hand rested on her hair, and his eyes upon her face, as she leaned against him caressingly and without fear, as though he were known and dear to her, rather than, as he was, a stranger. Skilled in reading human features, he read the nature easily which was dawning here, the susceptibility to joy and pain suggested by the lips with their mournful lines in repose, and their sunny, laughing smile which sparkled and then died; the too early depth and poetry of thought which were written on the low, broad brow; the latent tenderness which lay in the sadness of the upward look, and in the liquid melancholy depths of the eyes, soft and dreamy as the night. These might have told him that to secure happiness to the Child-

hood was easy, with its fleeting pleasures centred in a bird's carol, in a dog's love; but to secure it to the Womanhood was a more perilous venture, which might chance on shipwreck.

At that moment a little toy-swanie that was with him caught her eyes, and with a child's swift change of thought she uttered a laugh of delight, and threw herself upon the sands beside it, kissing its long ears, and bathing it fondly in her bright long hair. With a stifled cry Strathmore seized the animal from her arms: the dog was the one which had nestled in Erroll's breast, and refused to leave the side of the dead man; he could not see the child in her unconsciousness caress the brute whose fidelity had outlived his own, whose watch had been kept over her father's corpse!

She looked up at him, deeming that she had committed some great fault in touching a stranger's dog without his leave; and with caressing grace and penitence she leaned against him, lifting her dark, beseeching eyes:

"Lucille is sorry—Lucille was wrong! But he is so pretty, and he would love me—all things do!"

Callous to much, merciless to more, Strathmore, who had deemed that nothing in life could ever wound or move him, felt the burning tears gather in his eyes at the simple words and action of this child, so unconscious of his own deep guilt, and of her own great wrong! His voice shook as he stooped to her:

"The dog is yours—none have so great a right;

Lucille, if all things love you, will you give some love to me?"

She looked surprised yet wistful, and her eyes dwelt on him earnestly.

"Yes, Lucille will love you. But not *for* the dog. Tell me your name, that I may say it in my prayers?"

For many moments he made her no answer; and in the silence his loud laboured breathings hoarsely rose and fell. Then his hand passed slowly and gently over her hair, and his voice shook still.

"Ah, in your prayers! God knows I need them from all things innocent. Remember me and love me—I was your father's friend."

The last words were low with a great agony, and seemed to rend and stifle him in their utterance. His hand lingered for a moment in farewell upon her hair; then he turned and left her, bidding the spaniel, which clung to and fawned upon the child, stay with her. Young Caryll was coming swift as the winds towards them. Strathmore passed him without word or sign and went onward, leaving behind him, standing together on the sunny silvery sands, the boy Nello and the young child Lucille, between them the little dog which had crouched in its love upon the dead man's breast, when human friendship had betrayed, and human watchers had forsaken him.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE WHISPER IN THE TUILERIES.

MARION LADY VAVASOUR stood in her dressing-chamber, before her Dresden-framed mirror, come from a fête of one of the leaders of that brilliant set of which she was still the Fashion, the Cynosure, and the Queen. The lustrous light in those superb eyes was not dimmed; the mocking smile on those lovely lips laughed triumph that was unshadowed; the fair brow and the delicate bloom wore the brightness of their youth unmarred. For the world was as ever at her feet, and remorse had no part and no share with her; it could not whisper in her golden dreams, nor dog the royal negligent step with which she swept through life. Remorse! She knew it not. How could its ghastly cry be heard above the ceaseless chant of homage about her path?—how could its dread terrors force their way into the proud and dazzling presence to which kings bent and princes knelt?

She knew revenge, she knew cruelty, so do the velvet panther and the painted snake; but she knew not remorse, neither do they; and that dark tragedy of which she had been the cause, touched her no more than these are touched by the death they deal—save that she knew, when the world babbled of it, it babbled of her power; save that she loved to learn how deeply a woman's smile may strike, how widely a woman's loveliness may blast. True!—till she had wearied of the fidelity even of a guilty passion, all that she had vowed to Strathmore had, perchance, not been a lie; true!—there had come hours when she had thought that had they met earlier, met when their love might have been pure, and the breath of the world had not sullied their hearts, she might have given him such constancy as poets fable and as she mocked: the fleetest rivers have their deeper waters, the most heartless amidst us have their better hours. But her lust was Tyranny, her glory Power, and the evil which she worked smote not upon her—for her, as for Greek Helen, brethren warred with brethren, and men cast their lives into the slaughter! And this triumph was her crown. She stood now before her mirror, and let her gaze dwell proudly on the peerless form whose divine grace no living woman rivalled; then she swept onward to her carriage to go to that world which was her court. She was the most beautiful woman of her time. Who shall give me title so omnipotent, sceptre so mighty?

Where she went was to the Tuileries. Here the

English Peeress, the beauty of Paris, the leader of Fashion, had ever found her proudest triumphs ; here to-night, as countless nights before, Princes coveted her smiles, Queens were outdazzled by her, and Sovereignties paled beside the sway of the woman whose beauty owned no rival ; here, Marion Lady Vavasour was in the height of her brilliance, and her fame. And here, and thus she was watched by the man whom her love had made a slave, whom her lie had made a murderer.

She glittered through the titled crowds that were gathered in the palace of the Bourbons, with the sapphires glancing among her amber hair, and her smile of superb triumph upon her lovely lips, her choice and delicate wit falling like a shower of silver, her irresistible coquettices charming to blindness all drawn within her circle in the salons of a King. And he watched her—this divine loveliness that had betrayed him with a kiss ; this soft and patrician thing that had forsaken him with the vileness of the wanton ; those angel lips with their childlike bloom, which had whispered and wooed him to the bottomless abyss of crime. So much the more madly worshipped once —ay, *still!*—so much the more mercilessly was she now doomed, so much the more deeply damned !

The palace was thronged that night. The ball was on the occasion of a royal marriage, and all that was greatest in Europe was assembled at the Tuilleries ; but as her sapphires outshone all the jewels of royal peeresses and imperial orders, so she outshone

all the loveliness gathered there, while she floated through its courtly crowds, now listening to the flatteries of Princes of the Blood, now to the murmur of velvet-lipped Cardinals, now bending to her feet austerest Statesmen, now seeing bowed before her some proud crowned head. And Memory was far away from her in her superb omnipotence, her cloudless present—far as was Remorse !

She passed down the Salle des Maréchaux on the arm of the Duc d'Etoile, her perfumed lace floating about her, the sapphires starlike above her brow, the light falling on her dazzling face ; and every glance involuntarily turned on her and on her Royal lover, for such he had notably become. But as she went, unrivalled in her omnipotence, unequalled in her beauty, sweeping through the courtly crowds with wit on her lips and conquest in her glance, the eye of D'Etoile, resting on her, saw her face grow pale and a strange tremor seize her.

What was it ? Was there poison in that perfumed air—miasma in those royal salons—plague-taint, or subtle death-odour, burning from the lights which gleamed above upon her loveliness, or exhaling from the jewels which glistened in her bosom ? No, none of these ; we are not in the days of Medici and Sforza, and (grown virtuous from dread of science and of law) we do not slay the body, we only slay by slow and sure degrees the soul, the honour, or the peace of what we hate, because this is a homicide absolved of men.

What was it, then, that suddenly as she swept

through the presence-chamber of the Tuileries, made her lips grow white, her eyes gleam for one fleeting moment with the terror of a hunted antelope, her hand tremble on her Royal lover's arm? It was this only—the whisper of two words, which seemed to float to her from a distance, yet which reached no ear save hers:

“ *Marion St. Maur.*”

She glanced on all immediately about her—couriers, ministers, ambassadors, princesses, peeresses, maids of honour—but she saw that as none of these had heard, so none of these had spoken that whisper of her maiden name. But as she lifted her eyes, they fell upon the face of the man she had forsaken and betrayed; the man who, in the last hour she had beheld him, had hurled her from him because death was too swift and merciful a vengeance.

Strathmore stood at some slight distance, leaning against a console where the light fell full upon his face, which wore its look of cold and pitiless calm; and his eyes were upon her, watching her with a steel-like glitter, a dark tiger-passion, insatiate and without mercy, that the drooped lids did not veil.

And she who in her light insouciance, her omnipotence of beauty, feared Heaven and its wrath as little as the most daring of blasphemers, the most stoic of philosophers, turned pale even to her laughing lips, and felt the air turn sickly faint, the lights whirl round her, the crowd grow dizzily indistinct, and saw nothing but that gaze, with its mute and

merciless menace, suddenly met there as a ghost arisen from the tomb, silently quoting to her the Past, silently threatening the Future.

The weakness endured but an instant, too swift for even the Prince on whose arm she hung to note it, and she passed on—passed Strathmore. He did not move; he gave her no sign of recognition; but his eyes rested on her, and—he smiled. She knew the deadly meaning of that faint, chill smile; she had seen it on his lips before he went from her to meet the man whom he had doomed, and she shuddered and grew sick and cold, and shivered with vague and intangible terror, as at the chastisement of their mutual sin. In that single moment, which for the first time smote on her soft and brilliant life with a ghastly and nameless fear, his vengeance had begun.

The flatteries had lost their honey, the homage had lost its glory, the charm of the world was marred, the power of her sway was broken that night to Marion Vavasour; and while she reigned in all her radiance in a King's Palace, the hand of a nameless terror lay heavy upon her, and she saw, ever pursuing her with its iron calm, that ruthless and unspoken doom.

Henceforth there would be poison in her wine, a canker in her roses, a ghost beside her couch, an asp within her bosom. His vengeance had begun.

The Paris Season had commenced, with the marriage-ball at the Tuileries, something earlier than usual, and Lady Vavasour sat in her loge at

the Opera, moving her fan with all a Spaniard's grace, lazily listening to Mario and Malibran, or to the whispered worship of her *cobue* of courtiers, while the delicate sandal-wood perfume floated from her rich lace, and some of the brilliant deep-hued tropic flowers of the East lay crown-like upon her lustrous hair.

In the light, in the warmth, with a Prince's homage murmured in her ear, with diamonds of untold price glistening in her bosom, with a proud title of her own, in the sight of a proud Order, surely she, if any, was secured from the evil stroke of bitter fortune ; looking on her, it seemed that even Death itself must pass by this beautiful, pampered, imperious thing, as too fair to smite, too full of sovereignty to slay ! Yet where she sat, with the sweetness of music lulling her ear, and the gaze of lovers' eyes worshipping her beauty and entreating for its smile, lapped in her own dazzling, voluptuous, victorious Present, like the epicurean she was, the same fear which had suddenly smitten her in the presence-chamber of the Tulieries smote her suddenly here, the same chill ran through her, the same emotion for one brief instant blanched her lips, gave terror to her eyes, made the wit falter on her tongue —for she heard the same whispered words spoken on the air close by her :

“ Marion St. Maur ! ”

Yet they were but the words of the name she had borne before marriage.

“ Qu'avez vous, madame ? Vous trouvez l'air du

loge tant soit peu étouffant?" D'Etoile asked, with tender solicitude.

"C'est l'odeur, des fleurs qu'on a mises à mon bouquet, prenez-le!" said Lady Vavasour, holding to him the jewelled bouquetière, which Etoile took with such a subtle, graceful flattery in his thanks as only a Parisian can turn; but it fell for once dull and lost on the ear to which it was murmured, as Marion Vavasour pressed her fan against the lips on which she knew their bloom had paled, and thought in her soul, "Who can know it here? Not *he*,—surely not *he*!"

For the terror on the life of this courted and sovereign beauty who had been used to coquet at her will with Destiny, and rule Fate by a sign of her fan, a *moue* of her lip, was her dread of the man whose love she had fed to madness and goaded to crime, and who had spared her from death only that he might see her live to suffer.

As her eyes wandered, half unconsciously, half restlessly, over the house, in the full glare of the light on the opposite side, she saw him again, saw him as in the Tuilleries, with his eyes fixed upon her under their drooped lids, and upon his face that slight, chill smile which struck like the cold touch of steel. A few moments previous he had been in the loge which adjoined hers; now he stood fronting her, looking on her as he had trained himself to look, tranquilly, passionately, as in the Question Chambers of the Inquisition the Dominican, with gentle voice and soul of

steel, looked on the tortured whom he doomed, and bade the rack be turned.

And Marion Vavasour could have cried out in her dread, and risen and left the Opera House, as though fleeing from some haunting spectre; for she knew then that it had been Strathmore's voice which had whispered her maiden name. But she was too skilled an actress thus to betray herself; though of much cowardice with much cruelty (for her nature was one essentially feminine), she had ever at command finest finesse and calmest self-control: like many of her sex, pusillanimous to the core, she was an actress to the life. She sat there, now that his gaze was on her, with the bloom on her cheek, the smile on her lips, the lustrous languor on her eyes, while her royal lover leaned to her with suavest homage, and the wit, the scandal, the persiflage circled around her. She listened, she laughed, she moved her fan with softest coquetry; she reigned with all her negligence, her brilliance, her grace, her imperious charm. But in the rich harmonies of the music, the courtly flatteries of murmured words, the *jeux d'esprit*, the wooing homage which filled for her the hours of the *Prophète*, she only heard the single whisper of that name which had told her that the secret of her early life was in the hands of Strathmore. In the glare of light she only saw the face of the man she had betrayed, watching her with that merciless menace of the veiled eyes which quoted to her the unburied past, which foretold to her the shrouded future. Hear what she

would, that name sung for ever in her ear ; look where she would, that glance for ever followed and met hers ; there in the glare of the Opera House, with the light falling on the pale bronze of his face and the dark gleam of his passionless eyes, he stood before her—he whose love had been insanity, whose religion would be revenge.

And when after those brief hours, which had been to her one long-protracted torture—torture which was endured with a smile on the lips, lustre in the eyes, sovereignty seemingly shadowless as of yore, Marion Vavasour, was alone in her carriage, she sank back, trembling, quivering, unnerved, dreading evil with the shrinking terror of a delicate woman, shuddering from the fury of the storm whose whirlwind she, the sorceress, had raised from the passions of the man she had tempted and betrayed.

It was thus he ordained that she should suffer first, as the Dominican, with astute calculation, commanded that the torture should be administered gently and by slow degrees, so that each succeeding pang was tasted to the full. To wrench the limbs from out their sockets *at once* were too much mercy. Was it no torture to himself to go into her presence as into the presence of strangers ; to look with unmoved calm upon her face ; to hear echo on the air the silvery music of her voice ; to stand by and watch the gaze of those who had succeeded him fasten on her loveliness, and her eyes look up to theirs ? Truly it was such that when it had been endured, and he was alone in the solitude of

midnight or of dawn, when the strain was released, and the unnatural calm broken down, Stathmore's suffering was, as his love had been, a madness. In the great agony of that last fooled, cheated, guilt-steeped passion, which even in the riot of its hate begrimed the breath which whispered to another, and envied the dog that nestled in her bosom, his misery was fearful in its strength, fearful in its despair, for he loved while he loathed her still.

But Strathmore was no coward to *endure*; what he appointed himself, that he would have wrought out, though his own life had been the penalty at the close. His lust of vengeance was brutal, but none the less was it immutable as death, unswerving as destiny. He had the fierce passions and the profound dissimulation of an Eastern; therefore he trained himself to meet her thus, and she alone read the language written in the veiled depths of his eyes. The world deemed that the liaison of a year before had been dropped by him among the things of the past; and the world deemed also that, considering the tragic story which had been interwoven with its rupture, he was something callous to have forgot so soon; but then, the world remarked, he was a cold and heartless man, and for the issue of a duel he of course could not reproach himself. Poor world! great spy though it be, how surely, how universally it is chicaned!

Strathmore remained in Paris through the whole of that winter; and through that season, rarely and slightly at the first, more often and more markedly

towards the spring, it was remarked, chiefly by women, that Lady Vavasour was losing the brilliance of her beauty, and was looking pale, almost worn. It was the first time that such a rumour had ever been whispered against her dazzling loveliness, on the day now eight years past, when she had first appeared as the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux. What wrought it, was that which has power to shatter the strongest nerve, to break the boldest spirit, to undermine the most careless insouciance—it was a *hidden fear*, the asp among her couch of scented roses, the dagger suspended above her head by one frail thread of hair, which the world could not behold, but which never quitted her. He had shown her that he knew her secret, and he let that knowledge—the more bitter because indefinite—slowly and surely eat its poisoned way.

They knew each other's hearts, they whom sin had united, and sin had severed; and as she read her doom so he read her suffering, without speech, without disguise. That single name breathed in her ear told her that she was in his power; that single glance from his eyes told her with what mercy that power would be used; though when, or how, or where the blow would fall, she knew no more than we know when the stroke of death will descend upon us. And it was this endless uncertainty, this unceasing apprehension, which wore and tortured her till her careless, epicurean creeds were rent by it like filmy gauze, and the woman who had become so used

to sovereignty that she had learned to believe she could command every hazard of life at her pleasure, grew the perpetual prey of a ceaseless fear and a momentary anxiety, which gnawed at her heart the more cruelly because concealed from all.

Wherever she went, there Strathmore followed her, till his presence grew as fearful to her as the spectres which follow the distempered minds of those in delirium tremens. In the salons of the Tuileries, in the reception-rooms of ambassadors, in the entertainments of princes and nobles, at the Opera, on the Boulevards, in the clear noonday as she drove through the streets, in the midnight glare of light at some patrician bal masqué, she saw him; always before her, in the distance and as a stranger whose glance swept over her unmoved, but with the meaning on his face under the cold and courtly calm, which she had seen there when he went out to deal death to the man he loved, and with the threat in his fathomless eyes, which spoke to none but her. He was ever before her like some avenging fate from which to escape was hopeless, and which tranquilly and immovably awaited a chosen hour to strike. He was ever before her, with that unspoken doom in his glance, and that unknown power silently told in the slight, calm, cruel smile which she knew so well. And the fear which had possessed her of him, from the hour when her slave had risen to crush his tyrant, and the passion she had loved to excite to delirium had turned upon her in its madness, grew gradually

under this ceaseless watch into a terror unbearable. It made her nerves unstrung, her manner uncertain, her glance like that of the hunted antelope, when it listens for the eager step which gains nearer and nearer through the awful hush of the night in the jungles.

They noted that her bloom paled, that her dazzling insouciance was capricious and depressed, and they noted rightly; the beautiful hue upon her cheek, which so long had distanced art, now needed, for the first time, to be replaced by art. To regain that repose which had deserted her she had refuge in narcotics, which, however subtle, left their depression on the morrow; and to cover that depression had recourse to stimulants which, however skilfully prepared, left their mark on one, the happy and childlike sunniness of whose nature had been the chief spring of her ceaseless fascination.

The hidden canker in the rose ate at its core, and dimmed its bloom. Marion Vavasour ere this had been a perfect actress, and had never known one pang of pain; but that was when the peace and lives of others hung in the balance. Now it was her own that were in jeopardy; and so strong upon a mind naturally impressionable grew her dread of the vague doom which threatened her, and of the cold, pitiless face which, go whither she would, seemed for ever to pursue her, that she could have shrieked aloud and shrank away when, day after day, night after night, she met the gaze of Strathmore, and could have fled

out from his presence trembling, as those who flee from the ghastly phantom of their own imaginings.

That she never thus betrayed herself, was due to her proud and haughty spirit; where dissimulation alone might perchance have broken down, this enabled her so to meet, and brave unflinchingly, what became an hourly torture, that the world should never have title to whisper that Marion Vavasour was agitated by the presence of the lover whom she had deserted. To this, also, it was due that she never permitted her dread of Strathmore's power to drive her from the circles where she reigned. Once she felt tempted to flee from him to Nice, Florence, Pau, the Nile, anywhere where her caprice or her physicians might furnish an excuse; but she disdained and repelled the temptation; she felt that, go where she might, there would his vengeance pursue her; she refused to give to it its first triumph by surrender. Besides, she knew not *what* he knew; and Marion Vavasour was in her own epicurean fashion a fatalist. The blow did not fall yet, the blow might never fall; circumstances might arrest it, death itself might close his lips with her secret still unuttered. So she reasoned, so she reigned, throughout the Paris winter.

But in herself she never lost the sickening sense of that dagger which hung vibrating above her head to descend at any instant; in her white bosom, unseen by the world, the asp coiled ever under the freshness of the flowers, under the brilliance of the diamonds,

and ate and ate with its poisoned fangs. *He* saw how she suffered—this woman to whom her sovereignty was her secret, to whom her pride was so dear;—he saw, and drove the iron farther down into her heart by every glance with which his eyes met hers, compelling her, while the eyes of the world were on her, to smile, to coquet, to scatter her golden wit and her lustrous glances unmoved and undimmed, while she grew faint and heart-sick with the terror of that power, vague yet wide and sure as destiny, in which he held her. Thus he tortured her till the dread of meeting his gaze grew with her into a morbid agony;—thus he tortured her until, imperious beauty and accomplished actress though she was, her cheek paled, her eyes grew anxious, her health became uncertain;—thus he tortured her, for he willed that she should taste the full bitterness of vengeance by being forced to watch its slow approach, as the prisoner chained to the stake was condemned to watch the gradual onward creeping of the pitiless flame.

And he waited, for the blow of his revenge to fall in the sight of all assembled Paris, upon the same day in the spring-tide, as that on which, three years before, they had met at sunset on the Bohemian waters.

## CHAPTER XI.

THE POISONED WOUNDS FROM THE SILVERED  
STEEL.

EARLY in the ensuing Spring the carriage with the coronet of Vavasour and Vaux upon its panels, its chasseurs, its lacqueys, its postilions, its outriders, left the court-yard of her hotel to drive amidst all the other élite of the equipages of Paris, through the Barrière de l'Etoile, and round the Bois, and past the site of the ancient ruins of the Abbaye de Longchamps, whose religious rite has passed into a ceremonial of fashion.

The day was softly bright, the city was in its spring-tide gaiety, the dense crowds were sweeping down towards the barrières of the west, Paris was *en fête*: and Lady Vavasour's cortége, dashing through the streets with its accustomed royal fracas, bore onwards to join the great stream of carriages which brought the sovereigns of the Faubourg St.

Germain and the Quartier Bréda, the Royal Highnesses and the Empresses Anonyma, alike to the throng of Longchamps and the inauguration of La Mode this sunlit day upon the Boulevards. And she leaned back upon her cushions in her languid loveliness, with the imperial ermine, a Czar's gift, which formed her carriage-rug, turned aside, for the hour was warm, and her priceless perfumed point d'Angoulême gathered about her with that carelessness which was her own inimitable grace. The carriage joined the row, eight broad, on the Place de la Bastille, and closed in with it; all eyes turned on her, for she gave the law of the year and led the fashion, and men surrounded her as her Guards surround a Queen, Princes and Ministers spurring their horses to approach her, and stooping from their saddles to seek a word as eagerly as they would have sought a Crown.

She swept along the Boulevards and down the drives of the Bois, where the man whom her lie had murdered had been slain when the sun had set; and the past was not remembered nor repented, for remorse had no share in her shadowless life; remorse had no place in her world.

She was alone in her carriage; none were permitted that day to share that throne (of which her barouche-step was the *haut pas*) of the Sovereign of Fashion; her little lion-dog alone occupied the cushions beside her, with his jewelled collar on his snowy fleece, and in the double line of horsemen, on

either side the throng of carriages, on every lip there was but one theme—the beauty of the English Marchioness who gave the mode to Paris.

Lady Vavasour drove onward past the site of the old Abbaye, whilst Etoile leant from his saddle, breathing a Prince's flatteries in her ear, until she reached the full stream of equipages, where the occupant of almost every carriage (that was patrician, not lorette) was numbered on her visiting-list; and each one of those delicate *aristocrates* was either her friend for boudoir confidences, or her acquaintance for State dinners. And now in the rich morning sunlight, as she encountered their equipages and received their salutations, she saw that which sent an ice-chill through the warm current of her glad life.

What was it, slight, nameless, intangible yet to be *felt*, that she read in the glance of one or two of the highest women of the French and English aristocracies? Imperceptible to another, *she* caught it—for Marion Vavasour had a secret to guard, and whoever owns a secret always suspects that the world has unearthed it. That which she read, or fancied, in their look was not censure, not inquiry, not insolence, not wonder; it was more vague than any of these, yet to her it spoke them all. She caught it once, twice, thrice on different faces, and her delicate bloom paled; it was that chillness which is marked and felt rather by that which it suggests than by what it does, slight, but intentional as it was unmistakable. Etoile looked surprised; but he was too true a gentleman to

affect to perceive what in real truth bewildered him. For one brief second her soft antelope eyes lightened with ill-suppressed anxiety and with unrepressed anger ; there is no glass which reflects so delicately, yet so bitterly and so surely, every shade of disdain as the faces of trained women of the world. The steel with which their scorn thrusts is silvered, but the wound it deals is barbed, and deep, and poisoned. Lady Vavasour caught that disdain, and knew or guessed its meaning, and her cheek paled under the sea-shell bloom of her delicate rouge ; the thrust of the silvered steel struck to her soul, for she knew that it struck to the core of her secret.

The carriages rolled onward, and as yet the coldness lay but in look, the blow was dealt but from manner, her bows were returned as of yore, though with a certain distance, a marked chillness ; and Etoile found no constraint in her wit, no light the less in her luminous eyes ; she seemed to note nothing of the look which spoke so much ! But the asp in her bosom had fangs not one whit the less bitter because the smile did not leave her lips, nor the nonchalant grace of her attitude change : women cover their wounds, but under the veil they throb—they throb ! The carriages rolled on, and her postilions threading their way through the throng passed the stately equipage of her chosen and intimate friend Lady Clarence Camelot—that cold, proud beauty, in whose veins ran the “blue blood” of Norman monarchs, and whose social creeds were lofty if stringent. But

yesternight they had sat at the Opera together, rival rulers yet close allies ; but yesterday, so complete had been their sisterhood, that they were in private to each other " Marion " and " Ida." Now, the azure eyes of the descendant of Plantagenet looked with calm, cold regard at her, as though regarding a stranger, and, recognising her presence no more than she would have recognised that of a beggar, the Lady Clarence Camelot passed on round Longchamps.

On Marion Vavasour's lips, which were blanched to whiteness, the smile was arrested as on the lips of those suddenly smitten with death ; and while the smile rested there, into her eyes came a wild, haunting anxiety as they glanced over the crowd to see whether this had escaped all others. And as they glanced they saw—cold, pitiless, with the brutal menace in the eyes and the slight smile about the mouth, unmoved as though cast in bronze—the face of Strathmore.

He was watching the progress of his work—watching how slowly and surely, drop by drop, his poison fell.

The throng bore his horse backward ; her carriage rolled onward with the glittering mass making the tour of the Bois de Boulogne ; and once, twice, thrice, again and again, the Queen of Fashion was made to eat of the ashes of the deadly humiliation ; and the silvered steel thrust its barbed point farther

and farther down into her heart, probing deep to the core of her secret.

She passed the Countess of Belmaine ; she passed the Duchesse de Lurine ; she passed the Marchioness of Boville ; she passed the Vicomtesse de Ruelle ; she passed her oldest friend, Lady Beaudesert.

And all these dealt her the same blow, one by one, with the same chill, delicate, unerring weapon ; all these gave her no recognition even of her presence.

The procession of Longchamps, which had ever been one long triumphal passage for the proud and dazzling English leader, was one long pilgrimage of shame, worse than that which, in the centuries gone by, the barefoot penitents had made by that same route, when the blind, the sick, and the lame had thronged to the Abbaye altars, to the grave of Isabelle Capet.

On many tongues in that dense throng, among such as could observe it, was but one theme—the insults of her Order to the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux.

But she leaned back, not letting the smile even grow constrained on her lip, not allowing even a glance of anxiety in her eyes, a flush of anger on her cheek ; but negligent, graceful, tranquil as of old, not seeming to have noticed the thrusts which pierced her to the soul. At last, as her carriage was turned back to Paris, it passed side by side with the equipage of the most notorious adventuress of the demi-monde,

Viola Vé, celebrated for ruining a peer of France every trimestre, and whose extravagances startled even “equivocal society;” as her barouche-wheel locked slightly in that of Lady Vavasour, the Lorette smiled and bowed, and said a few careless words to the English Peeress, as though they were of the same world and the same order!—and laughed as her carriage rolled on, as one who gives an insult she knows *cannot be resented*.

The open outrage and insolence were translatable to every looker-on in that dense crowd; the key to it was a mystery which convulsed Longchamps with bewildered amazement, and convulsed Paris similarly in a few hours after. And at this coarse indignity Marion Vavasour turned white to the very lips, and trembled exceedingly; for she was proud, very proud! and she had had her foot on the neck of this haughty and patrician world so long, so long! It was so bitter to have the diadem torn from her brow, the sceptre shattered from her hand!

Once again, as rallying her courage she glanced around in defiance of the insults, she saw in the yellow sunlight the face of Strathmore, watching her with the smile on his lips and the menace in his eyes, watching her as the serpent watches the bird which cannot escape from its fangs. Marion Vavasour knew that it was he who had her secret, and was on her track; his hand which by the silvered steel of these women’s indignities, dealt her this poisoned and mortal wound.

With all nonchalance, all hauteur, all easy grace, unchanged, but with her lips blanched and drawn over her pearly teeth, the most beautiful woman of her time returned with that slow and glittering procession from Longchamps to Paris, veiling the quivering nerves and the throbbing pride with calm courage, with admirable artifice—for she was a more perfect actress than any the stage has seen. Yet she ran the gauntlet of a deadly trial ; for in those hours which that long pageant occupied, in the dense throngs which fashion gathered, all the eyes of Paris Proper were on her, and the crowd was divided but into two classes, those who passed the outrage on her and those who witnessed it !

As at last she swept up the steps of her own hotel, she did not observe a vagrant woman loitering hard by on the pavement; but the Bohemian had watched there through livelong hours, watched to see her face as she returned from Longchamps, and a smile came on Redempta's lips as her vigil was repaid, and she muttered in Czeschen :

"It is begun. I have not lived in vain, beloved !  
She suffers ! she suffers !"

It was true—she suffered ! Marion Vavasour had laughed her sweet soft laugh at the mortal agony she dealt to others, but in her own bitterness she, the discrowned, who had known no pain and no remorse, suffered—suffered even as Marie Antoinette when the crown was wrenched from her golden head, and the Dethroned was led out for the gibes of the people.

There was some confusion and agitation in her household as she crossed the great parquet of the hall, but not noting it she swept onward up the staircase, turning to the groom of the chambers :

“Where is my lord ?”

The man hesitated slightly, and looked grave ; she repeated her question imperiously :

“Where is his lordship ? Answer me !”

“Pardon me, my lady, but during your ladyship’s absence his lordship was attacked with a—slight indisposition.”

An intense alarm and anxiety came into her face —strange visitants there, for the world had never known that she had loved her lord !

“Indisposition of what kind ?”

“Something—I believe—of a syncope, my lady.”

He was too polite and too elegant a philomath to use so brief a term as “fit,” but her fears grasped his meaning, and she bade him send the physicians to her in her boudoir. They came, honeyed and deferential, and from much cream and verbiage the simple truth gradually oozed that, in plain terms, the Marquis of Vavasour had been struck by apoplexy after a pâté of nightingales, followed by too many bouchées and rosolios, at his luncheon, and now lay, sensible indeed, but in a state most precarious, of which the issue was doubtful.

Then she dismissed them with a queenly bow of her graceful head, and signified an imperative necessity that she should see her lord alone on family

matters of the highest moment. The physicians, curious, like all of their trade, vainly strove to represent that their presence was indispensable for every second; all Europe bowed to her will, and she permitted none to gainsay it; it was obeyed now. His score of attendants retired from his chamber, and her husband was alone when she entered it.

With her rich and graceful beauty she came and stood by the bedside of the sick man, on whose face death had written its mark out plainly; and, for he was quite conscious and had every sense left him, he opened his eyes and looked at her curiously, for it were hard to describe the change which had come over her features, and she wore no mask with him.

She leant over him as she sat beside the couch, after a few hurried words of condolence, speaking low and swiftly:

“Vavasour! All Paris knows it!”

Into the supine face of the old Marquis came a gleam of malicious amusement crossed with surprise.

“The deuce they do!” he said, with a laboured articulation. “Who told ‘em?”

“God knows! What matter *who!*” And she, whom grief in all its agony, passion in all its fury, had never moved, save to that gay, triumphant amusement with which a child crushes its costliest toy, spoke with breathless agitation, her lips quivering, her fair hands trembling, her eyes filled with tears of bitterness! “They know it! Even Ida Camelot cut me dead an hour ago; a score of them passed me

as they would pass a dog! And even that woman Vé, Caderousse's mistress, dared to insult me—ME! They know it! Nothing less could make them act so, nothing else could give her title with impunity to—”

The sick man chuckled low and with difficulty, as though this were the best joke which could have come to cheer him on his death-bed:

“Gad! I wish I had been there! Deuced pity to have lost it! Eh! bien, ma belle! you can't complain; you've cheated them a long time!”

And where he lay back among his pillows he chuckled still, faintly, for his breath was with difficulty drawn, but with a malicious amusement that was in ghastly contrast with the marks which death had set upon his face.

A passionate anger and misery gathered in hers:

“And that is all the pity that you——”

“Pity!” broke in the Marquis, with a laugh which struggled with a spasm of the breath. “Gad!—the deuce!—what pity do you want? You've had your own way, ma belle, and women love it. I was a great fool to take your terms, for they were confounded high; however, I don't mind it, you've amused me. It was a drawing-room vandeville, with the fun•always kept up; but pity—'fore George! women's ingratitude——”

And the Marquis choked with his disgust at the ill return which was given him, and with his amuse-

ment at what roused him even from all the apathy of a moribund.

"But, Vavasour, now—now—why not now? If you would, still it might be done—privately, secretly; secrecy could be bought, and the world would never know——"

She spoke low, tremulously, incoherently, and in strange agitation for the flattered, courted, proud, omnipotent beauty! Her hands played nervously with the lace and silk of the counterpane, where she leant half kneeling against the bed; her attitude was almost supplication, and her haughty loveliness was abased and dejected; for she had worn her diadem long and proudly, and it was bitter to the Queen of Fashion to have her sceptre wrenched and her purples torn aside for all to see the secret of the discrowned.

"Why not now, Vavasour?" she whispered eagerly, while her lips were hot and parched. "It would be so little to you; it would spare me so much. Now—now, before it is too late! I can purchase inviolate secrecy——"

The dying man interrupted her with his stifled, laugh rattling in his throat, while his sunk eyes leered maliciously, and his hand feebly played with the diamond circlet of her marriage finger—the badge, she had whispered to Strathmore on the rose-terrace of Vernonçaux, as the badge of Servitude and Silence.

"I dare say! and *ma belle veuve* would then win,

perhaps, M. D'Etoile, who knows? As it is, she will have to be only his mistress! No! I am not in the mood! You think one *en moribond* ought to lend himself as a lay figure? Ah! there you are wrong, ma belle; you must ask the favour of some one of your old lovers, that man with the Vandyke face, who killed his friend for your beaux yeux; or one of the new ones, perhaps, may pay the price more graciously."

Again the horrid, unfitting laugh, chuckling and rattling in his throat, sounded through the stillness of the death-chamber; Lord Vavasour had eaten his last pâté of nightingales, but he had still palate and power to enjoy what he and most men with him find of still sweeter flavour—the pleasure of Malice. And leaning there against the costly draperies of the bed, in her lace, her jewels, her delicate floating dress which that day had given out the fashion of the year to Paris, in her lovely womanhood, in her haughty grace, Marion Lady Vavasour—who wore no mask with him—sank forwards, thinking nothing of her husband before her, but with her white hands clenched, her teeth set tight, her fair face blanched, her rich hair pushed back in its masses from her temples, eating in all their bitterness of the ashes of Humiliation, tasting in all their cruelty the death-throes of Abdication.

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE ERRAND OF THE LOST.

THE household was hushed, all moved with noiseless footsteps through the wide marble staircase and the stately corridors and the brilliant-lighted chambers of the Hôtel Vavasour: the presence of death was nigh, and breathed its solemnity even through the gilded halls and the pompous hirelings of that magnificent palace, where wit was usually as rife as in the salons of Rambouillet, and cost was as unheeded in luxury or dissipation as in the days of Vitellius. It was known that his lordship could not recover, and that, Vitellius-like, his goblet was reversed and his last Falernian was drunk, and the Prætorian Guards of Pallida Mors were leading him out, stripped of his purples, and made nothing better or greater than an old, bloated, gluttonous man, to hurl him over the fathomless abyss, where none would

mourn him, and down the dark, cold river whence none return.

The household was still and awed through this early part of the spring night, and his wife sat in her own chamber, when her dinner had been served and dismissed, musing and alone. From custom she had dressed for the evening, as habitual, and the delicate shower of costly lace fell about her, and the diamonds and amethysts sparkled in her hair as she sat there, her head leaning on her arm, her lips white and pressed together, her fair proud brow knit in vain thought—thought how to baffle, how to escape from the vengeance which netted her in and held her tight beneath its stifling meshes.

Only five-and-twenty years had passed over her head, and she must lay down the sceptre, and put the crown from off her brows, and pass from the haut pas and the throne, to mingle with the jeered and common crowd. Already! already! She must leave her kingdom in her youth. She had known that sooner or later this must come, that sooner or later this shame and bitterness must fall; but in the royalty of her omnipotence, the gladness of her power, she had forgotten her doom. She had believed that it would come, perhaps at some far distant time, when her beauty was spent, and when in age it would matter but little; nay, she had at last believed that so happily had fortune favoured her, that her life would flow on for ever in the sunlight, and that she would live and die in the honour and odour of

the patrician world she ruled, her secret never guessed, and buried with her in the grave which would bear the name and titles of Marion Marchioness of Vassour and Vaux.

And now—now—in the brilliance of her youth, in the splendour of her triumphs, the stroke had fallen; and she must go out, to be the jibe, the mockery, the scorn, of her rivals and her foes.

The dews stood on her brow, her hands clenched in her anguish, she shivered and started from her solitary reverie—it was so horrible!—to stoop her pride into the dust; to be banned for ever from the haughty, shadowless, patrician life she loved; to be the scorn and the derision of the women she had outshone and outrivelled, and made follow the mere fashion of her drapery, the mere mode that her changing caprice gave as law.

She started and rose to her feet, and there was a piteous misery in the eyes ere this so proud, so kustrous, so full of careless laughter: she had known no mercy for others, but she knew suffering for herself. As she rose, her lace caught in and overturned a gold filigree basket filled with the notes which had come during the past twenty-four hours; one rested, as the shower fell, upon her dress, and mechanically she raised it and broke the envelope; they were only a few lines in French, bearing the date of the previous day:

“**MADAME**,—Lord Cecil Strathmore has some secret of your past, with which he intends to take

his vengeance on you to-morrow, in the sight of Paris. I know no more than this, which I gathered from what I accidentally and unavoidably overheard between him and Madame de Ruelle this morning. I acquaint you, that if you deem fit you may seek to avert what seems to threaten indignity, or worse, to you, and I am willing to answer to him for having done so. In this I render you good for evil, but, as you know but too well, I have loved you more faithfully than most.

*“Veuillez agréer Madame, l’assurance de ma considération distinguée.*

“FALCONBERG.”

That note she should have received the night before; and it had lain there in the jewelled basket unnoticed, while the Queen of Fashion had gone out to meet her doom. She, sceptical of all else, believed in that hour in Destiny and Retribution; the writer was an Austrian, a mere boy in years, whose young life the beautiful panther had torn and destroyed for a night's amusement, a coquette's triumph, at one of the gorgeous masked balls of the Viennese Court: and while she read her lips quivered and her hand shook as it clenched upon the paper.

It told her no more than her fears had known before—than the cold and pitiless face she had seen that day had told her without words.

“Poor Falconberg, poor child!” she murmured consciously, for in triumph we cast aside human

tenderness, but in despair we value it. “ His mercy —*his* ! As soon seek pity from marble, warmth from ice ! As soon ask the vulture not to tear, the lion not to rend—— !”

And she sat there with the pallor of terror blanching her lovely lips, which trembled as with cold : she knew that more hopeless than to seek mercy from the beasts of prey was it to seek compassion from the hand which her love and her lie had dyed with blood.

And yet—and yet—her eyes fell on her own loveliness. It had bent him as the wind the reeds ; it had melted him as the flames the steel. Might its ancient power not be wholly fled ? could he who had been her abject slave gaze on it wholly unmoved ? Up from the dread of a great despair grew the sickly shadow of a vain hope, side by side with the mad impulse of an unconsidered resolve. She was so used to her sovereign sway, her proud omnipotence—resistance to *her* prayer seemed a thing impossible. And hastily, and on the instinct of a misery which made death from his hand look better to be coveted than the living chastisement to which he doomed her, she arose—nerved to a hopeless and desperate purpose.

Late that night Marion Vavasour entered a little brougham by one of the side-doors of her own residence, and was driven rapidly through the few streets which parted her from the Hôtel de Londres.

The carriage was hired, the driver a stranger, and she herself was enveloped in long, black, sweeping folds, which concealed her person, while a thick black veil thrown over her head wholly obscured her features. Etoile himself might have passed her at his elbow and never penetrated her disguise ; those who would have died for one smile from her eyes would not have recognised her in that veiled and sombre form.

The driver stopped at the hotel, and came to the door for instructions.

“Inquire if Lord Cecil Strathmore be visible ?”

The man obeyed, and ten minutes after returned.

“Milord is within, madame, but they doubt if he will be seen so late.”

“Very well, let me out.”

She descended from her carriage, and entered the hotel. A few moments’ conversation with one of the attendants, two louis d’or slipped into his hand, and she followed him up the staircase, along the corridors, and towards the door of one of the great suites.

“Your card, madame.”

She handed him one, on which was printed a name, but not her own, and the servant entered the apartment leaving her without, but with the door not wholly closed, so that where she stood she could hear his voice, and that of the one who replied to him.

“A lady entreats milord to see her for a few moments ?”

“The ‘Countess Lena !’ I do not know the name ; and what an hour ! However, show her in——”

The man returned, threw the door wide open, ushered her ceremoniously into the salon, and retired, closing the door behind him. He presumed this veiled midnight guest, whose voice thrilled him like sweet music, came from the Bréda Quartier, and envied the Englishman who received her.

The door closed, and Marion Vavasour was alone with Strathmore. He rose as she entered, standing under the full light of the chandelier which glittered immediately above his head.

“Madame, may I ask to what fortunate chance I am indebted for this honour?”

As the calm, chill, courtly tones, addressing her as a stranger, fell on her ear, she shivered—could that suave, gentle, immutable voice ever soften to pardon, to mercy! She was silent, pausing in the centre of the chamber; and he moved a fauteuil towards her.

“Be seated, madame. I await your pleasure.”

She did not take the chair; she did not answer; and Strathmore, marvelling if his veiled visitant were dumb, awaited her pleasure—leaning his arm on the marble console while the light was shed on the peculiar Vandyke type of his features, with the dark gleam of his fathomless eyes under their drooped lids, and the cold straight line of the calm brows. She looked at him and shuddered, for she knew the fierce passions which lay beneath his high-bred and courtly suavity; she knew the steel gauntlet which was covered with that delicate, velvet, broidered glove of a courtier’s manner. All the courage which had

brought her hither on a mad impulse failed ; the last time that she had been within his reach his hand had been upon her throat seeking her life ! She sickened and shuddered with the memory of that ghastly hour, that awful torture, when death had been so nigh ;—noting how she trembled, this stranger, this veiled woman, Strathmore approached her gently.

“ Have no disquietude, madame. If I can assist you, command me.”

“ Strathmore, you can spare me ! ”

The words rang out almost with a shriek ; and as the words smote on his ear, he staggered back, and a spasm passed over his face as at some wound suddenly dealt by a keen knife.

His passion was not dead because it had changed to hate ; nay, hate rioted in him *because*, though love abhorred her, love still craved her. For this woman had been to him sovereign, conscience, world, heaven, all that life can hold—all that eternity can offer !

A moment,—and he conquered himself ; he held in an iron rein every emotion which could betray him ; his face grew chill and passionless, as though it were cut in stone ; he looked on her, as he had looked in the Tuileries,—as he had looked in the sunlight of the past day,—and was silent.

He had trained himself to see her thus without a sign, that he might watch her suffer ; and she might sooner have wrung tears from a cast of bronze, a moan from a statue of marble, than mercy or weakness from him.

" You can spare me, Strathmore ! "

The words rang out hoarse in their bitter supplication ; cold and tranquil his answered her.

" I can."

" And you will—you will ? "

For all reply he smiled ; and that slight smile, as it passed over his face where the gaslight fell white upon it, was more pitiless than any speech which could have condemned her.

A faint cry broke from her lips as she saw it ; she cast from her the trammels of her heavy sweeping cloak, and flung back the black lace which shrouded her like a Spanish mantilla. Her loveliness was once more before him, unveiled, in all its brilliance, the light streaming down upon her face with its glittering hair and its lovely youth, the sapphires flashing in her snowy bosom, the perfumed lace, half falling off, half trailing round, the divine grace of her voluptuous form. And she stood silent, her head drooped, her eyes soft with lustrous tears, her bosom heaving with its voiceless sobs, the light falling full upon her. This beauty had been omnipotent to tempt him once, to cast aside all laws of God and Man—this beauty might tempt him yet again. This had stricken his strength till it was a reed within her hands—this again might give her back her power. And she stood there, while her eyes looked up to his, and her heart heaved where the jewels gleamed ; and the lace sank farther down—down—from off her beautiful shoulders, with the diamonds glittering where they

nestled in her breast. But his will was iron ; his veins were ice—for her ; and his eyes did not change, his smile did not alter, as his words fell cold and clear on the silence.

“It is too late for *that!*”

A burning flush crimsoned her face, and she shrank under the blow. She was a woman, and one who glossed her amours with delicate refinement, and one who was used to rule omnipotent, and yield with a sovereign’s grace—not to sue and be repulsed. Tears, genuine and bitter, started to her eyes, and her voice thrilled with passionate emotion.

“Strathmore! Strathmore! I am in your power—spare me! I am a woman—be pitiful to me! You loved me so well once—have some pardon for me now!”

He did not change his attitude ; he leaned there against the console, with his eyes, under their drooped lids, fixed on her ; and his words answered her, falling low and chill on the silence, like the dropping of ice-water :

“I marvel you dare say that to me ! Go!—you were always a matchless actress ; it is a pity to waste your time, your tempting, and your loveliness !”

She shivered as she heard him : from fiery passion, from menace, from reproaches, she would have hoped to win, to touch, to tempt, to torture him into some mercy. With those cold, measured, inflexible tones, all hope died out. She felt as those who, gliding down into a bottomless abyss upon the Alps,

feel the ice-wall they strive to grasp, slide, smooth, and frozen, and shelving from their touch, as they sink downwards to darkness and to death.

With a low cry she threw herself at his feet in all her soft abandonment of supplication; her proud head humbled to the dust before him; her white hands wrung and clenched; her loveliness, thrown there before him like a criminal's who kneels before her judge.

And he looked down on her unmoved, save that his vengeance was dear to him, and sweet: she suffered—at last!

“Strathmore! Oh, God! see, I kneel to you; *I*, who never bent to any mortal thing! I may merit this from you; I do not dare to deny it. You may have much to avenge on me—much!—though I loved you; ay, I loved you as I have loved no other! Women crave conquest, power, cruelty; but we *love*, despite that—love, though we love ourselves first! If I sinned to you, I sinned *for* you!—”

“True! It is the trade of the courtesan!”

Where she lay at his feet, prostrate in her loveliness and her abasement, she shuddered under the calm, chill, brutal sneer—she! the woman who had ruled over princes, and to whom kings had knelt! Yet—she would not renounce all hope, she would not give way from all effort: she lifted her head, so that the white light fell on its lustrous hair, and shone in her lovely eyes, with their appealing prayer; and that face, in its

blanched pain, its prostrate beauty, its stricken pride, was more resistless than in its most radiant hour of witching sovereignty.

“Shame me! humble me! strike me as you will! I wronged you, and I am in your power, and a woman, and defenceless! Yet hear me: be great enough to forego vengeance—be noble enough to heap coals of fire on my head by Pardon. If I erred, were *you* sinless? If I were guilty, were *you* stainless from crime? See!—you have made me drink the bitterness of humiliation to the dregs! Cannot that content you? Spare me, more for the love of God! Hear me, Strathmore, and have mercy! To-day you have let the world whisper it, but to-morrow’s whisper may soon efface to-day’s. Lord Vavasour is dying, dying fast; let me bear his name in peace? If you do not reveal the truth to his heirs, none will dare attack, and sift, and search—none will raise the question. I may live in peace; live without shame, and sneer, and jibe from the women I have rivalled, from the society I have ruled. Only spare me this—this! Do not hunt me down to poverty and degradation, do not expose me to the world!—”

She stopped, and a sob choked her voice, for here, if acting still, the actress felt her part and pleaded her prayer in all its acrid bitterness, its keen, imploring pain, for she felt and pleaded for herself. She suffered,—she suffered,—and the burning tears gathered and fell, and under its delicate shroud of

lace her form shivered with the physical cold of a great dread, of a convulsive suspense.

She pleaded as the Condemned plead for life. Her future lay in this man's keeping—and he had spared her from death only to bid her live "to suffer."

She had made him in God's sight and in his own a murderer. Could she hope for mercy from him? Could she strike vengeance from his hand?

A death-like stillness reigned between them as her voice ceased, and she lay there at his feet in her abject supplication, her abased loveliness, her stricken pride. He stood changeless, motionless, his face unaltered in its tranquillity, his eyes unfaltering in their relentless gaze :

"If you were drowning before my eyes, and my hand stretched out could save you—you should perish in its need! If you were bound to the stake, and one word of mine could save you—I would not speak it! If you were dying of hunger and thirst, and a cup of cold water from my pity could save you—I would refuse it in your death hour! I have answered. Such mercy as you gave, I give to you; no other."

As his words fell slowly out upon the silence, chill, tranquil, and inexorable as Fate, a shudder ran through her frame, and a cry broke from her lips wild and piteous, like that of a woman who receives her death-warrant.

She trembled, shivered, shrank before the iron

pitilessness, the icy hate, of this man's nature, on which her own might fling, and wear, and spend itself for ever, yet make no more impress than the fretting waves which break upon a granite sea-wall, and leave no sign of all their feverish travail. And she lay crouched at his feet in all her fallen loveliness, stricken and paralysed as by a cruel mortal blow.

His eyes dwelt on her long and meaningly, while not a muscle of his face changed from its rigid calm, its bitter exultation ; he watched her shudder, and writhe, and crouch there at his feet with a faint smile playing on his lips—as he would have watched her strained on the rack or bound to her funeral pyre ; and his voice hissed slowly through his teeth as he stooped and whispered in her ear :

“ Listen ! I have what you can never rob me of—I have my VENGEANCE. You have lived to suffer ! And you will fall lower and lower into sin and infamy, and misery and want ; fall as those fall who trade in beauty, and die as they die when beauty leaves them : die in the streets—die craving a crust. Go !—your fate waits for you.”

The brutal doom hissed in her ear, maddened her as a shot a panther, till all its desert nature wakes to life under its pain. She started, and uprose and stood before him, her face blanched to the lips, her eyes alight with a tigress-glare, fearful in her loveliness, ghastly in her brilliance, dangerous in her weakness and her despair.

"Abase me, expose me, destroy me, work your worst; *I* plead no more! But, by the God whom we have both outraged, the hour shall come when the mercy you mete out to me I will mete back to you, when you shall seek in vain of earth or heaven, Strathmore, for the pity you now deny!"

She stood before him in all her beauty, while the light streamed down upon her, her face turned towards him with the glittering hair thrown back, her lustrous eyes dilated, her form instinct with despairing passion, her voice rising and quivering in the air till it rang with a menace of the future, with evil dark and merciless as his own; she stood there, terrible as Até, prophetic as Cassandra. And thus they looked on one another, this man and woman, so lately bound in the close ties of passionate love and mutual sin, now sundered farther than they betwixt whom oceans roll. Thus they looked on one another; and in her eyes was the lurid gleam of a vengeance which soon or late would pioneer its path and sate its lust; and on his lips sat the calm, chill smile of a vengeance which would never cease from pursuing, and never stay its hand for pity or for prayer, which held its quarry in its grip, and tasted its power slowly, drop by drop, with thirst which grew the greater with its every draught.

Thus they looked on one another; there was a moment's silence again, as though she still mutely awaited whether yet he would not yield to mercy, yet abstain from vengeance, and bid her go, loathed,

abhorred, condemned, but—spared. There was a moment's silence, in which the very air seemed pleading for her pardon, and supplicating for the God-like vengeance of forgiveness. Then she cast one look upon his face: it was white, calm, chill, inflexible as the features of the dead, and unmoved as they to prayer, or woe, or menace; and without word or sign she turned and left his presence.

They had parted

And, as the door closed, he fell heavily forward, with a crash, across the marble, weeping a woman's very passion of tears;—loathing life, longing for death, abhorring himself while his heart was breaking. He had loved her so utterly;—he loved her still!

To her he had been as granite, but in his heart he was so weak. His vengeance had so much guilt, but his life had so much misery.

“Oh God, I grow a fiend!” he moaned in his great wretchedness, his added crime. “Oh God, why did they not kill me in my birth?”

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE CORE OF THE SECRET.

AT twelve that night, while Lord Vavasour lay dying, and Paris danced and supped, and gamed and laughed, and whirled through the merry hours, a party of some dozen or so were gathered after the opera for a petit souper in the salons of Madame de la Ferriole, the wife of one of those princes whom the Bourse makes in a day. The hôtel was superb; the ameublement would have been deemed marvellous in a palace; figuratively, for its cost, the supper could boast of liquid gold for its wines, and melted gold for its dishes; and the Sèvres on which it was served was rimmed with pink pearls: yet Madame de la Ferriole (genuinely, Madame le Maire) was still on the outskirts of fashionable society, and was at this moment still passing through that transmigratory period which transfers the owners of Capital among the leaders of Ton; and blazons the Or with the

Gules. She moved highly, but not with the highest, and therefore her guests around the supper-table discussed the insult of Longchamps without the key to it, which as yet only lay in the hands of the ultra exclusives of one certain set ; and, therefore, they hailed with pleasure and empressement the late advent of the single member of that set whom they had yet secured, and who had deigned to come and sup with Madame de la Ferriole, partly because, *en vraie Parisienne*, she respected the wealth, partly because, *en bel esprit*, she wished to satirise the appointments of the roturière. That single member was Blanche de Ruelle.

With all the “ languor of good tone,” but with all the curiosity of scandal-mongers, the party around the millionaire’s supper-table sought the confidence of the haughty and unapproachable aristocrat, who, lying back and slowly breaking her ice, seemed disposed to talk of little but the new opera, and of that only to her own escort, the Vicomte de Channellan. Blanche de Ruelle had been the first to whom Strathmore had entrusted the secret of Marion Vavasour’s downfall, and bidden deal the poisoned wound with the silver steel ; she had been the chief to enable him to mete out revenge and chastisement thus slowly, subtilely, witheringly. And although he in unfolding, she in receiving the story had placed but one motive in sight and surface—to wit, the proud wrath of an insulted Order, and an outraged and patrician Matronage ; the chastisement had been the more wil-

lingly, the more completely done because she had once loved—hopelessly—where the woman whose abasement she was summoned to carry out had been madly worshipped. The same passions move the world as in older and more transparent days; they are but the more closely veiled.

And now, about the supper-table of La Ferriole, little else but one topic was circulated, if abandoned for the moment, to be resumed the next; and the bored, languid, slander-seeking flâneurs, masculine and feminine, lounging away an hour after the opera over the priceless wines of the Princess of the Bourse, sought its explanation from the first of those who had dealt the deadly thrust that day in the green allées of the Bois. For the insult to the English Peeress was the theme of Paris; and the high station of those who had passed it raised curiosity to frantic wonder and to breathless impatience. Blanche de Ruelle let them babble on about it in her presence, while she spoke of Auber's music with Chanrellan; then she raised her haughty eyes in answer to the questions which turned directly towards her, playing gently with her Spanish fan.

“Pardon, madame! Lady Vavasour? Oh, I pray you drop that subject; society has been grossly outraged, foully insulted. Have you not heard? Indeed! Why, the marriage was fictitious—she was never his wife. The world has been deceived, and we—we have received the Marquis's mistress.”

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE ABDICATION OF THE PURPLES.

AT twelve of the night the Marquis of Vavasour and Vaux died, and his chaplain, standing by, said unctuously over the bloated body, "Blessed are the chosen who die in the Lord," for he whose breath had just left his body had had many and rich benefices in his hand, and "died in the Lord," according to all the clergy of the Church of England, which sees no sins in patrons.

"Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!" and the good chaplain, having said the Last Communion over the past Marquis, went to send the first telegram to the future one. But, rapid as was his own, one had preceded it to the distant heir, who, from a nameless Attaché, would become a Personage. Where the two passions race, Revenge will outstrip Avarice of the two, though both are hell-hounds fleet of foot.

This latter message ran thus :

“From the Lord Cecil Strathmore, Hôtel de Londres, Paris, to William Vere-Lucchiniham, Esq., British Embassy, Constantinople.

“I hear the Marquis, your cousin, died to-night, suddenly and intestate. See me here as soon as you arrive, or you will lose the best part of the personality.”

Now, in the absence of all will of any kind, since the Marquis had ever had obstinate horror of a testament, and shunned the word of death as utterly as the Romans on their tombstones, the entail devolved on Vere-Lucchiniham, sole, though distant, heir presumptive, and all the rich personality would go to his widowed Marchioness. Therefore, when this telegram came to him with his morning coffee, acquainting him of the new fortunes which Pallida Mors, best friend of the Living, had wrought for him, the young Attaché was bewildered at its latter clause; but knowing well the character of the sender, for he had been under him at Turin, never thought of slighting or neglecting the strange summons, but only felt a grateful and wondering eagerness as to its purport.

At twelve of the night the Marquis of Vavasour and Vaux died—of too much pâté de rossignol and rosolios at luncheon—not a great death, perhaps, but in the main scarce so harmful an one (to others) as Mithridates’ or Hamilcar’s, or Julius Cæsar’s, or divers whom we call heroes, because they perished by a weapon with which they had slain thousands ere their decease, and slew by their legacies thousands

after it. To be gluttonous of nightingales is bad ; but it may be worse for the universe to be gluttonous of nations ; a gourmet only kills himself ; a hero fills a larger bill of mortality. The one, however, has only the restaurants, the other the world, to chant his *De Profundis*; and, granted, it is murder on a larger scale to kill ten thousand men to make a victory, than to kill ten dozen birds to make a pâté !

The Marquis of Vavasour and Vaux died, and left the world a legacy of many inimitable *cuisine* receipts, and one great wonder. His young cousin, Vere-Lucingham, succeeded to the Marquisate with all its honours, and refusing to acknowledge her claim to one iota of the rich property which the law would have allotted to the wife of the deceased, to one gem of the Vavasour jewels which had so long sparkled on her brow, the new peer proclaimed to Europe that she whom it had so long received and honoured had no right or title to its respect and homage, but had only been the dead man's mistress. And when the charge was brought, the condemned could put forward no defence, could allege no denial : there had been no marriage ; and the Law is not to be seduced by a feminine sophism, dazzled by an actress, or enslaved by a woman's loveliness, but wrings out one uncourtly, and coarse thing—truth.

She, whom the world so long had known and worshipped as Marion Lady Vavasour, had kept her secret well. Who says that her sex has not the power to guard a secret closely ? Pshaw ! they keep one

for a life-time, if—their own! She had kept it, secure that it would never be told by her lord, and that when he died, with him would die the sole possessor of it. And now the secret was given to the winds, and hurled out to the light of the day, and flung to the world where she reigned, as the deer is flung to the hounds at the curée! For the hell-dogs of Vengeance had been on her track, and they never lose scent of the trail.

Years before, cruising among the West Indian Isles, and lying in a harbour (rarely visited) to have his yacht fresh coppered, the Marquis had seen her, lovely as the morning. Her parents, English planters, were dead, and she was fretting at, and wearied of colonial obscurity and insular imprisonment, like a brilliant tropic bird in a cooped-up cage. She looked at her marvellous loveliness, and knew that while it could give her sway wider and mightier than the Cæsars', it must bloom to its full beauty, and fade and die unseen, like the radiant blossoms of some matchless flower in the tangled forests and dense swamps of her own island. The Marquis saw her, loved her, and offered her—the world. She knew, by intuition in her lovely youth, how great a price such beauty as hers should fetch, and refused to sell it for less than his coronet. He declined the payment: she declined any other. A pause ensued, in which both steeled themselves from surrender, and each awaited the other's capitulation. At last the man grew impatient, the woman doubtful: he was

lured by her loveliness, she was lured by the vista of emancipation and conquest which stretched out before her ; they each bent to a compromise. She dispensed with the legalities of marriage, but stipulated for the semblance ; she did not require to be made his wife, but she required that the world should hold her so : he, well amused to *joliment jouer son monde*, and, musing that (unbound) he could end the comedy whensoever he should have fatigued of it, consented.

She came to Europe with him as the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux : it suited his monkeyish malice to play the trick on his order and on society, and he readily lent himself to all which might best sustain the delusion. She was received as his wife—and the rest was soon accomplished by her own unequalled beauty and unrivalled tact. She soon ruled the fashion, and set her foot on the neck of the world. And as time went on the old Marquis grew so well accustomed to her reign, and was so well amused to see society fall before her and men go mad for her loveliness, that he abandoned all thought of dissolving their compact ; partially perhaps because he did not care to tell the world himself that he had palmed off a lie upon it, partially because his own weak and supine character had shown its facile points to her, and was ruled by her stronger will with facility, and without his being even aware of the governance. Thus what she appeared to the world she grew absolutely to regard herself.

Worshipped, courted, obeyed as the Marchioness

of Vavasour and Vaux, she forgot that she had no legal claim to the title and place she filled. One or two obscure persons in that remote, uncivilised West Indian island were all who knew her secret; how should these reach her great world, or her great world reach them? Moreover, they were in her pay, and bribed to silence; so it was little marvel that Marion Vavasour—such I must still call her—deemed her position secure and her single secret safe from revelation; little marvel that, proud, made to love power and to use it royally, haughtily fastidious as though a born patrician, with some blood of an illegitimate Stuart actually wandering in her veins, and accustomed to the homage of exclusive circles, she had learned to look upon her rank as unassailable, and felt the degradation of her deadly fate bitterly, bitterly—as any queen, who with her crown torn from her brows, and her purples rent from about her, ever was bidden to descend from her throne and come out to the jibes and the hiss of the multitude where yesterday the highest sought her smile, where to-day the lowest could revile and scoff and stone! Strathmore's vengeance would have been more merciful if he had slain her in the glare of that summer morning—a moment's pain, and all had then been over. He had chosen a more lingering and cruel retribution: he had bade her live to suffer.

Her secret was known in Paris, and nothing of the bitterness of her humiliation was spared to the Discrowned. She had outshone the one sex, she had

maddened the other ; who was there amidst the order she had insulted, the women she had rivalled, the men she had fooled, to break the violence of her fall, to heed how brutally the diadem might be wrenched from the fair, proud head, raised in its lovely sovereignty so long above them ?

Her secret was known in Paris : in the cercles, in the salons, in the Tuileries itself, in Galignani's, on the Boulevards ; in all the cafés, in all the boudoirs, over fine ladies' chocolate in their bedrooms, over gourmets' five hundred francs' breakfast in the Maison Dorée, it was the theme of the hour, to the exclusion of all else ; it flew across the Channel as swiftly as special correspondents' copy could reach Printing-house-square, and filled all the journals, Anglo and Gallic, with its startling sensation-news, its incredible scandal. All Europe knew this beautiful Helen with the antelope eyes, for whom princes and chiefs had been ready to war, almost as in the old days of Hellas. All Europe was summoned as witness and auditor of her shame and her abdication. From the Palace to the Press all Europe arraigned her—and for what mercy could she look in her abasement, when those who found her guilty were the nobility she had insulted, the society she had trepanned, the rivals she had humiliated, the lovers she had fooled ? These made judges more pitiless than Alva's Council of Blood.

True, for sake of her loveliness many asylums offered to her, in terms which now she could not

resent as insult, and of them she accepted Etoile's. But the protection of a Prince was almost as bitter to her as the obscurity of a convent—she who had reigned in the palaces of Europe to be classed with Violà Vé, she who had shone amidst women of blood royal and visited at St. Cloud and at Windsor to sink amidst lionnes of the Rue Bréda and Enghien toy-villas ! It was a bitter change—from the purples of the Patrician to the stained robes of the Hetira.

She suffered—ay ! she suffered cruelly, this woman, who had mocked at all human grief with her silvery laugh, and dealt out anguish and death as gaily as a child deals both to the painted butterffies that he slays for his sport. She suffered cruelly ; for to the proud and flattered woman there was no chastisement so fearful as humiliation. And it was a scourge of scorpions wherewith he lashed her—he, whose hand, though unseen, dealt every blow under which she shrank.

With the keen cunning and the patience in pursuit, of her vagrant race, the Bohemian had learned the secret of the aristocrat from a quadroon woman whom she had found, by what chain of hazard and investigation combined, matters not. In her hands it was powerless for evil—a gipsy could not be heard against a peeress ; but she placed it in those which her shrewd intuition knew would use it most widely, most mercilessly. When Strathmore had taken his yacht, as it was believed, to the Western world, he had gone to pursue every link of the clue given him

by the Czeschen, in that remote unnoticed colony whence the first thread of his vengeance had to be found. It had needed long and patient search ; those he sought were obscure and unknown ; but he was patient in the trail as an Indian, and when his gold had bought over their silence and purchased their fidelity to the secret they had in keeping, his vengeance was his. He had returned to deal it—his hand invisible, but his will directing its every step, its every sting.

With his revelation he had bought opprobrium and chastisement for her from the highest ; with his gold he bought insult and degradation for her from the lowest. As it had been his intimation which had caused the patrician women to cut her dead in the passage of Longchamps, so it had been his will which had caused the lorette to greet her familiarly in the allée of the Bois—so it was his wealth which purchased every subtle indignity, every suave outrage which, by a cool word or an insolent smile from those in whom womanhood is disgraced, classed her with them, and struck deeper than a dagger's thrust into the heart which, with all its sin, with all its licence, remained haughty, fastidious, refined, aristocratic to its core. A laugh, a note, a bow, the pointing of the monstrari digito, the shame of coarse epigram, or sneering quatrain, or obscene caricatura, the insult of courtesans' friendship, or courtesans' invitation—these were the weapons with which the unseen hand that dealt her doom, stabbed her mo-

mentarily, mercilessly, with a retribution as subtle as it was relentless. He had bade her live to suffer! It environed her, it pursued her, it poisoned the very air she breathed; she grew exhausted under it, this unending vengeance, which never slacked its speed, which never slaked its thirst, which, in its subtlety and its power, seemed all but supernatural. My brethren, are not men's passions ever so when they break the bonds of nature, and trample wide the mercy which God yields, but they deny?

He had bade her live to suffer; and she did suffer, this woman, whom no remorse had ever touched, no pity stirred, no tenderness stricken, but who had pride, which suffered deadly agony in its fall. There is a torture of the spirit which is more devilish and more terrible to endure than the shorter and coarser torture of the body; and she—she who had reigned so long!—knew this to its uttermost. She knew it when the men-servants of a household which had used to be obedient to her slightest gesture, could revenge themselves for many an imperious word or haughty command, by the slight and the sneer which the hirelings of the fresh lord had no scruple to deter them from offering to the mistress of the dead. She knew it when the women whom she had scored from her visiting list as beneath her rank, or refused to enter on her invitation-roll as roturières or rococo, could pay her back in whatever coin they would. She knew it when she stood alone, a queen dis-

crowned, in the chambers where she had so long reigned absolute with a crowding court about her, and looked down the long vista of the magnificent salons, where yesterday every art-trifle had been hers, every will had bent to hers, every guest, every servant, ay! even every picture on the walls, or jewel in the tazze, or flower in the conservatories, had been *hers*, and whence now, she passed out with less honour than the lowest hireling who moved about their chambers, with less right, or title, or share in them than the dogs which slept upon their cushions.

The shame of a great sin had never smitten her ; she knew it not ; but under the shame of a great abasement she writhed, she shrank, she shuddered, as the women of old, who were given over, naked and bleeding, and hooted, to the pillory and the scourge. Is she alone ? Surely not, for with mankind it is not the crime which is dreaded, but the scaffold.\*

The Duc d'Etoile's carriage awaited her on that day when she passed for ever from the residence and the state of the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux. She entered it, sweeping through the great crowd, which assembled to gaze upon her as a notoriety, with all her accustomed haughty grace, now with a shade of defiance in it, and with her teeth slightly set together, for henceforth the world and she were at

\* "Le crime fait la honte et non pas l'échafaud," says Corneille. But the world reverses the poet's dictum ; and in the world's eyes and our own, we may sin as we please, provided we avoid the scandal of being gibbeted for it !

issue, and would contemn and confront each other. But this was only *for* the world; alone, the fallen empress bowed under the bitterness of her degradation, and writhed as upon a wheel where she was chained for public gaze and public mockery, as the carriage rolled onward to the Duc's villa; Etoile was not with her—some court ceremony detained him at the Tuilleries, and he had written that he could not be at Auteuil “*jusqu'au souper*,” in a note, in whose rich compliment already she learned the difference of a Prince's wording to a Peeress of England, and to one of Viola Vé's Sisterhood. She needed the solitude; she was thankful for it. Away from the eyes of the crowd, or from the presence of her lovers, Marion Vavasour's high-strung spirit gave way, like a bow overbent. She who had looked on all pain as her sport, as the young cat claims the agonies of the dying bird for her play, she knew it now for herself.

She was alone; on her arrival the chambers seemed stifling, the very evidences of a prince's wealth prepared for her looked loathsome; they were the insignia of her fall. She needed to suffer in solitude—once—once—for henceforth she would be amongst those whose wealth lies in their smiles, whose livelihood hangs on the brilliance of their beauty, and who must ever laugh—laugh and love, with the rouge on their paling cheeks, and the iron sharp in their souls! She went out into the sheen of the spring sunshine, sweeping swiftly and unheedingly through the grounds of the Duc's villa. The birds sang about her path;

she scared them from her ; their song was jarring mockery in her ear. A gardener's child asked her for alms ; she spurned him from her with a cruel word ; she had lived to envy that beggar's brat playing among the roses. A bright-winged butterfly fluttered in the grass at her feet ; she trampled it to a brutal death, for daring to be joyous there—that senseless insect !—in the sunny light.

She swept onward swiftly, and unheeding where she went, while in the distance across the stretch of wood, and in the sunny mists of coming evening, uprose the roofs and spires of Paris—Paris, where she had reigned idol of its Court and leader of its Noblesse; Paris, where she had wielded more than a sovereign's sway ; Paris, where she had sunk in all the bitterness of her fall. She swept onward, fast and blindly, through the glades and gardens, her lips white, her teeth set, her frame quivering with the shame of that day's degradation, till a branch of one of the early roses struck her across the brow, and recalled her to herself with its sharp physical pain. The flowers swung in the sunlight—the flowers which, with that more poetic element mingling in her nature, she had ever loved and interwoven with her beauty. Now, they recalled a thousand ghastly memories ; with a rapid gesture she broke them asunder, and tore and scattered their fragrant leaves upon the earth : she was, even as those roses, a lying loveliness with a canker at the core ! And, with a passionate moan of pain, Marion Vavasour sank down upon the stone steps of the terrace to which she had unconsciously taken her

way, and, sinking her graceful, haughty head upon her hands, gave free vent—in solitude—to the bitterness of a fallen pride, to the misery of a world-wide degradation.

Yet even this luxury of loneliness she was denied :  
“ You suffer *now!* ”

The words, hissed in her ear in strange ill-spoken French, made her start and rise with her old proud imperiousness, yet with something of fear ; for the ruthless vengeance which pursued her had, now that its worst was wrought, left its terror upon her, and in her nature, as in the panther’s, something of cowardice ran side by side with cruelty. Bending above her, over the grey ivy-hung coping, she saw the dark figure of a vagrant woman ; it was the Bohemian, Redempta, who had stood there watching her, with a dark hot flush warming the pale olive of her features, and lending them new life and light—a flush of thirsty joy. For to the wild, half-savage nature which had known no duty but its love, no law but its instincts, revenge looked great and holy : a just peacc-offering to the beloved dead.

To Marion Vavasour she was unknown—her face, though twice beheld, unremembered—and, in vague alarm, she glanced around, and saw that she had wandered so far to the outskirts of the grounds that she was only surrounded by woodland, with none within call ; her hand instinctively sought for gold, and tendered it in alms to this gipsy, whose gaze filled her with a nameless terror, thus suddenly met in her hour of solitude, in her day of dishonour. A smile, mournful

in its utter disdain, crossed the lips of the Bohemian, and she motioned it aside with that calm dignity with which nature had dowered her :

“ Should I touch *your* gold if I were starving ? I came for a richer guerdon than all the wealth of empires—I came to see you suffer ! ”

“ Suffer—suffer ! —”

She repeated the word vaguely, mechanically ; in that moment of abandonment her nerves were unstrung, her strength beaten down, and the defiance she had assumed for the world had but left her the more exhausted and heart-sick with the faintness of despair. She could not resent the Bohemian’s words, but only dimly marvelled at them.

The gipsy looked at her, a smile lighting her eyes, and breaking up from the immutable melancholy of her face, while her brown hand clenched on the white, soft arm of Marion Vavasour :

“ Ay ! I have toiled, and laboured, and endured for that, only for that—to see you suffer ! You were the murdereress of Marc Lennartson, the slayer of what I loved. Ah ! false fornicatress, did you never hear his blood cry out for vengeance ?—did you think to smile, and sin, and drag men down to hell with all your loveliness ; and never have your crime come back to you ? You slew him—and you laughed at his death. You slew him—but I have avenged him ! I have been on your trail day and night, and year after year ; I burrowed to your secret at last, and I gave it to Strathmore to destroy you. You suffer ! —

your lips are white, your eyes are dim, your face is haggard—you suffer! You have eaten of such bitterness as you gave; you have fallen from your proud estate; you will die in lowest infamy. God has given me vengeance—God has given me vengeance!—”

The words broke swift and fierce from the Bohemian's lips, with all the ferocious passion of her savage race, her eyes glittering, her voice triumphant, her hand clenching harder on the delicate arm she bruised in her grip, as she watched the woman she had hated and pursued shrink back and shiver, and turn sick under her stripes, as the scourged under those of the lash. Then the glow faded from her dark cheek, the vengeful lust and joy from her gleaming eyes; she loosened her hold and threw up her arms with a wild, piteous gesture to Heaven:

“Oh, God! thou givest me Vengeance, but thou canst not give me back the Dead! She suffers!—she suffers!—but he——”

The shrill, agonised cry died in a broken moan, her arms fell, her head drooped; she stood livid, mute, motionless as a statue. For in this lawless, vagrant woman, born of savage blood and bred by savage laws, brute instincts were outweighed by one great love; and that love turned even the long yearned-for hour of her vengeance to dead ashes, to withered fruit—for vengeance could not give her back her dead!

Her eyes dwelt on the face of Marion Vavasour with a fixed and lifeless gaze of unutterable melan-

choly, of fathomless pain, and her voice came slowly and hoarsely from her lips :

“ I have smitten you, but I cannot make you render back the life that you destroyed ! I revenge, but I cannot recal ! He is dead, and my youth lies with him in the grave ; though I wring you with every torture, I cannot undo your work. Yet—when you live in shame, and die in infamy, you will remember the woman who loved, yet was forsaken by him, avenged him on you, who betrayed and drove him to his death. If you had spared him, you had been spared ! ”

Then she turned, and moved slowly away with her head bowed, passing out of sight through the leafy aisles of the trees ; and Marion Vavasour stood alone, with the chill of a great and nameless terror upon her. Her hands clenched on the stone coping as if for support, her eyes swam, she shivered in the mellow sunlight, she recoiled under the chastisement of the great sins which had found her out and come home to her—fruit of the seed sown. She shuddered there, where she stood in the warm evening air, and crouched down like a thing of guilt, while the dank dew stood on her fair, proud brow. And, as though led by the hand of an avenging angel, her eyes, dim in her bitter, throbbing misery, unconsciously followed the circling sweep of a white-winged swallow skimming the surface of the earth ; and as they pursued the bird’s flight, fell on the place where it rested, a block of marble, lying amidst green luxuriance of

spring-tide flowers and the leaves of drooping trees,  
which bore the name of the dead below :

BEETIE ERROLL,

AGED 33,

Killed by the Hand of his Friend.

The grounds of the villa touched the cemetery of Auteuil ; beyond, well-nigh at her feet, lay the grave of the man whom her lie had given to death, with the brief record carved there by the remorse of his assassin. And she, who believed in no God, believed at last in retribution, and stood there paralysed and stricken with a deadly fear, looking down on the tomb where the swallow rested and the sunlight played.

Yet, still—still, the soul of this woman knew neither remorse nor repentance, for these, if they take their spring from crime, yet are holy, and purify while they scathe. But only as the panther in its mortal pain grows fresh hungered for the death-grapple in its blind instinct of revenge, so she in hers grew athirst for added evil—evil which should smite him who had been the companion in her sin, yet who had pursued her as though he were guiltless—evil which should blast the life that had destroyed her own, and strike to the dust the iron will that had stricken her—evil in which she should hiss back into the ear of Strathmore the words with which he had doomed her : “ Such mercy as you gave I give to you—no more !”

## CHAPTER XV.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE.

OVER that grave the twilight shadows stole, the evening dews gathered in the spring violets which clustered round the marble, the birds went to roost in the boughs which swayed above, and the first faint light of the young moon fell across the letters of the inscription, carved deep into the stone as though to stand there, in their recorded crime, through all change of season and all wear of time, eternal as the sin of which they told. She—his murderer—had gone some hours past; and by the grave, unconscious that she had been there before him, and there sworn a vow of vengeance ruthless as his own, stood the companion and the avenger of her guilt. Always thus in solitude and in the stillness of the night Strathmore came hither; often, very often, for his nature was too brave and too proud to spare itself

one tittle of its chastisement, and the love which he had borne the man whom he had slaughtered, seemed to well up in deeper tenderness as everything else in him grew harder, colder, and more merciless. A command he could not resist seemed to impel him to come there as men go to the scene of their past crimes, and to stand beside the record of his guilt, beside the tomb where the life his hand had slain in all its glory and its youth, lay rotting to decay in the womb of the black, dank earth.

There, with his head bowed on the cold marble, and his hands clenched on the wet grass that already covered the ground, he often lay through many hours of long, lonely nights; in what remorse God alone saw. He would have poured out his own life like water, to bring back the life that he had slain.

He stood there now, gazing down upon the white shining stone and the dark leaves which swayed against it; he felt as though some atonement had been wrought to Errol by the vengeance which the day just passed had crowned. Had his arm ever paused in the blow he had struck to the assassin of one, and the betrayer of both, it would have been nerved and steeled afresh by the memory of the dead. Beneath the polished ice, the courtly worldliness of Strathmore's character, lay the fierce, untamable nature of the Barbarian, or the untutored Southern, their passions, their love, their vengeance; to him there was not alone revenge in that which he had wrought on the traitress who had stained his hands in blood;

there was a wild justice done, there was a duty expiated to the dead in the retribution which had pursued the murderer.

As he stood there in the shadowy light, while the moon streamed upon the sepulchre lying at his feet, the solitude, which reigned unbroken about Erroll's grave, for the first time was shared, and on his ear fell the low, mellow, chanting voice of Redempta the gipsy.

“English lord, I have given you your vengeance ! Is it sweet in your teeth, or has it turned to ashes as you ate ?”

He started as her form suddenly rose from the depths of the woodland gloom and stood before him by the grave ; but the chill smile which had so much of cruelty came on his lips as he glanced at her.

“Redempta, the only thing in life whose sweetness never palls, and cannot die, is vengeance.”

Her deep, lustrous eyes, which were now heavy and weary, gleamed for the moment with the evil which glittered in his own, as at the touch of fresh flame dying embers leap to life.

“Ay, ay, she has suffered ! I have seen misery gather in her eyes, and shame bowing her head to the dust, I have watched her shiver under the scorn of laughter, and I have heard her moan with pain like a hopeless, fallen thing. She has suffered ! *That* cannot escape me !—*that* cannot be undone ! I have avenged him, and now——”

Her voice dropped, and she was silent, while over

the lurid light of her eyes a humid softness gathered, and her lips trembled with a voiceless movement—her thoughts were with the dead. For the heart of the woman was in pain, and sickened with the futility of a revenge which could not yield her back what she had loved ; it knew not the exultant and pitiless lust of the man, which rioted in vengeance, and fed on its knowledge, and its memory, insatiate and unpalled. For there was this wide difference between the passions of their lives : hers sprang from love which still lived and was deathless, his from love which had become hatred, and in that hatred lost all other sense.

Strathmore glanced at her in the gloaming ; he owed this woman much, since he owed her the first secret of his power over the life which he had pursued and hunted down ; and the sole price which the Bohemian had asked or taken had been that which she had first named : “to see her suffer.”

He stretched out his hand with some louis d’or :

“ Redempta, you are ill-clad and in want ; take these now, and in the future let me serve you ? ”

She signed aside the proffered gift with a proud gesture of denial, and on her face came a strange smile, derisive yet melancholy :

“ My lord ! I told you long ago that Redempta the Vagrant took no price for that which she brought you —no wage for her vengeance. Since his hand lay in mine, no man’s gold has soiled it ; and with the future I have no share ; my work is done. The future is for you : it lies before you ; go where it beckons ! ”

As the Czeschen words were uttered in the monotonous, chanting recitative in which she spoke, to the memory of each recurred the spring night far away in Bohemia, when the ruddy gleam of the gipsy-fires had shone through the aisles of the pine woods, and when from the slumbering passions written on his brow she had made sure prophecy of all which, when they should awaken, would scorch and devastate his life. Her hand closed on his arm in a grasp which he could not have shaken from him without violence, while her eyes dwelt on him where he stood in the gloom, and studied his face with the same fixed, dreamy gaze with which she had looked on him then : a look which had much of compassion.

*“I have no future, but one waits for you ; you must reap as you have sown ; you must gather the harvest, and eat of the fruit of your past. It is the inexorable law ! The past has been wrought by your own hand ; but the future will escape you. You will seek to build anew, and lo ! the curse of the dead sin will rest on your work, and the structure will crumble, falling to ashes as it reaches its fairest. The sin of the guilty has been avenged, but the sin to the innocent will never be washed away. You will be great and powerful, and success will go with you, and fame ; but the blood-stain will be on your hand for ever, and when you have made atonement, behold it will be seized in your grasp, and through you will the guiltless be menaced !”*

The words in her Czeschen tongue fell slowly and

melodiously in the silence in her mournful and monotonous recitation, while her eyes dwelt on his face with their vague, fathomless gaze. Her hand dropped from his arm and left him free.

"In the future you will remember the words of Redempta. We shall meet no more. Farewell!"

She turned from him, and, with the swift, noiseless movement peculiar to her tribe, was lost in the veiling shadows of the night. He stood motionless where she had left him, in the dull, grey light as the moon passed behind the clouds of the east. Again at her words ran a ghastly chill, as at the touch of steel in a vital wound; less from their prophecy than from their truth; the future stretched before him, darkened for all time, by the shadow of remembered guilt. His hand might pioneer his road to power, and reap him honour in the sight of men, but there for ever on it must rest the stain of innocent blood. His life might pass onwards in the fulness of years and the ripeness of triumph, but there for ever at its core must lie the curse of an inexpiable act.

Never to lose it, ever to bear it through all the years to come, that burden of life taken, never to be restored; of sin wrought, never to be undone! Veiled in the mist of hidden years, who knew what guiltless life that guilt might strike? who knew what retribution might be coiled and waiting to take its vengeance for the unforgotten crime? who knew where the after-harvest of his passions might be reaped and garnered?

The future! the future! He had said in his soul, "vengeance to the living, but to the dead, atonement." Standing there beside the grave of him whom he had slain, while the words of the prophecy echoed in his ear, the phantoms of the years to come seemed to rise and swarm about him, and rend, and tear, and shatter from his hands the work of Expiation.

That night the Seine wound slowly and darkly through the open country and under the pale, clear stars, and among the rich glades of woodland, towards the city, there to grow black and sullen beneath the arches of dim-lit bridges, and to wash the low walls of the dreary Morgue, and to see the yellow candle faintly burning above the iron cradle of the *Enfants Trouvés*, and the thousand lights gleaming bright along the palace façade of the Tuileries.

And where the river was still clear, and cool, and fresh, ere it had reached the evil heat and brooding shadows of the city, where green leaves still swayed into its water, and in its depths the starlight gleamed, where its darkness was still repose, and its silence holy, a human form hovered on its brink, bending wearily towards the tranquil gliding waters, where the water-lily floated, and the hush of night seemed visibly to rest.

It was so cool, so serene, so peaceful: to lie there lulled to dreamy death by the cadence of its ebb and flow, and know no more the passionate pain, the breathless tumult, the vain despair, and the unending

bitterness of life, were this not wisdom, oh you who suffer?

It looked so to her; for her soul was weary of its travail, and her heart was fain to be at rest. She looked far across the dark and silent country, where no living thing stirred, and upward to the stars, whose white light fell upon her deep and melancholy eyes: her hands were pressed upon her bosom, and her lips moved in faint, broken words:

“I have avenged thee. What have I more to do with life?”

Her head drooped upon her breast, and she leaned nearer and nearer towards the waters, where the quiet stars were shining, and the pale lilies slowly floating in their shroud of leaves, where were oblivion, and peace, and death; and in the silence she listened to the tranquil murmuring of the tide. And as she thus leaned nearer and nearer yet towards that cool and restful place, in her weary eyes shone the gleam of unshed tears, and in her face a new light came as on the face of one who, having been long imprisoned in the loneliness of exile, beholds escape at last, and liberty and rest.

From her parted lips a whisper stole, broken and yearning, on the hush of night:

“My love! my love! I come!”

And in the silence there was the dull moan of severed waters, and the troubled lilies trembled on the river’s breast: then, with a sighing sound, the wind swept over them, and all was still.

The waters flowed upon their changeless course.

Through the summer night the river wound its way under the radiance of the stars, and bore her with it more gently than life, more tenderly than human hands. The waters rippled on with liquid murmur, and the dead body of the Bohemian floated down the stream in its serene and solemn rest, finding repose at last after the heat and travail, the passion and the pain, of many years. To her untaught, unfettered soul, love had been God, and vengeance, Duty; and death was ransom justly won, after a mission justly wrought; death in her wild, instinctive, barbaric creed was sure reunion with him for whom she had suffered and been sacrificed, and to whom her life had been unceasingly consecrated even to the last, if erring in its revenge, yet heroic in its martyrdom.

The waters bore her onwards slowly, softly, as merciful hands bear the bier of the dead; now in the cool shadow of the leaves, now in the clear sheen of midnight planets, while on her upturned brow and her closed eyes the moonlight shone with fair and peaceful gleam, and in her dark, floating hair the stainless lilies wound, and through the hush of night the winds gently breathed over the surface of the waters, which murmured low about her as though in pitying whisper:

“Rest in peace, O human soul! And judge her not for sin which had its root in love, you great and countless criminals upon earth, whose lust is avarice, and whose god is self.”

## CHAPTER XVI.

## AFTER LONG YEARS.

A SULTRY night brooded over London, close and stifling in the dusty, crowded streets, fair and pure above-head, where the stars shone over the leaden roofs and the fretted pinnacles of the great Abbey, over the thronging carriages rolling through the midnight, and the black river, with its spectral mists rising against the sky. It was a hot, oppressive night, with heavy storm-clouds drifting to the westward, and every now and then a far-off roll of thunder faintly echoing; and outside the walls of St. Stephen's men thronged, talking eagerly, and avaricious of news, and waiting to learn the fate of the existent Cabinet; for in the political horizon, as in the summer skies, a storm threatened darkly, and the kingdom had thrilled with the first ominous echoes. And they surged and swayed and filled all the crooked streets round about, and were newly fed by fresh arrivals, and talked

thirstily in busy groups, some anxious-eyed and with pale, eager faces ; for the Ministry was unpopular, and on the issue of the night there rested not alone the question of resignation, but the question of war or peace, in whose balance the God of Gold hung trembling.

Within the walls the heat was heavier, the crowd more dense, for many peers had come down to their seats beneath the clock, and the galleries were crammed ; the import of the night was widely known, and the attack upon the Ministry from the most distinguished leader of the Opposition carried with it all the aspirations of his great party, and was keenly dreaded by his adversaries then in office.

For he was essentially a great Statesman. His genius was emphatically the genius of Power. In classic ages he would have been either a tyrant as Pisistratus, or an intriguer as Themistocles ; a ruler as Cæsar, or a conspirator as Catiline ; what he grasped, how he grasped, mattered nothing to him, so that he had his hand on iron reins, so that he had his foot on bended necks. The subtle ruses, the unscrupulous finesse, the imperious command, the absolute dominance of power, these were what he loved ; and what he wielded, for his mind was one of those which are formed to *rule*, and before which the mass of minds involuntarily stoops suppliant. In his age and in his country, his ambition was perforce chained within bounds, and he could not be that which he would have been in a nation or a century

where such governance might have been grasped—an irresponsible and despotic ruler, recognising no limits to his sway, and reigning by the sheer strength of a will of steel, and of an intellect which would have raised his people into greatness and dominance abroad, and would have permitted no rebellious hint against his *fiat lux*. This, circumstance and nationality forbade to him; but the character and the genius which could have made him this, made him in the highest sense a great and successful politician. A profound master of statecraft, an astute reader of men, a skilled orator as well by the closeness of his logic as by mere rhetorical grace, comprehending to the uttermost the truth of the trite byword *ars est celare artem*; never for one instant irritated into abandonment of the suave courtly dignity which did much to fascinate men to his will, and with that proud disdain of wealth, of empty place, of childish honours, which gave to his career a lofty and unsullied renown—he who in his youth had desired Age and Power, now, approaching to the one, and having attained to the other, found ambition richly ripened to fruition, and exercised over the minds of men a sway wide and acknowledged, a fascination resistless and dominant.

As he rose at midnight in the hot, close stillness, all eyes turned on him, and the cheers which thundered his welcome echoed loud and long, then died away, leaving a silence in which the fall of a pin would have been heard, had one dropped from

the lattice-work, behind which were seated the fairest and proudest women of the two great political parties. The dead hush reigned through the Lower Chamber, so that no syllable of the opening words should be lost, as upon the air fell the first clear, chill, melodious tones of his voice, which in invective was ever tranquil, in command ever calm, in denunciation ever courtly, but whose wrath scathed keen as steel, whose mockery pitilessly withered all it touched, and whose dreaded sneer spared neither friend nor foe.

He stood in the full light, one hand in his breast, the other slightly outstretched; on his face a certain melancholy repose, a tranquil and haughty power; in his eyes the swift light, which swept the House like an eagle's glance; on his lips the slight smile that his opponents dreaded; while the lucid, classic, resistless flow of his oratory rolled on, calm, polished, subdued, as suited an audience he had long studied, never losing its dignity, while it rose to denunciation, holding in passion, while it lashed with scorn, fascinating the ear by the melodious music of voice, while it scathed with delicate irony, or rose to stately and measured rebuke.

He spoke long and with a masterly eloquence; his speech was an analysis and attack of a measure of the existing Government, obnoxious at home and pregnant with offence abroad. Loud and repeated cheers thundered through the Chamber as his keen logic mercilessly dissected the weak and wavering policies of the Ministry, and his brilliant argument cleft

down their barriers of defence, and rent asunder their sophistries of rhetoric, as the sword of Saladin cut its way alike through iron casque and veil of gauze.

When he resumed his seat the victory of his party was virtually won, and one of the most marked triumphs which had attended a continuously successful career had been achieved: a tottering government, already jeopardised by its own imprudence, and unpopular with press and people, had been shaken by an attack to which it could oppose but feeble reply and futile defence, and it was widely whispered that the Ministry must resign on the morrow.

Since the great speeches of Sheridan and Canning, few had created so keen an excitement, few weighted so markedly the balance of parties, few thrilled the House so profoundly with the breathlessness of a gladiatorial contest, the heat of a close struggle, the grandeur of a great conquest. As he left the Lobby afterwards his name was on every tongue, and while the proud tranquillity of his features and of his manners was unruffled, and he passed from the scene of a supreme conflict with the easy negligence of his habitual air, unmoved to excitement or to exultation, in his eyes gleamed an imperious rejoicing light under their drooping lids, and they glittered dark with a grand triumph; for this man's god was Power, the essence of his life, the goal of his ambition, the idol of his creed.

As he passed out from the Commons to his night

brougham, the multitudes gathered outside (amongst whom had been spread swiftly as wild-fire the news that the Ministry had been defeated on their unpopular measure, and the country been saved from the risk of a needless war by the issue of that great Field-night) recognised in the gaslights the grace of carriage and the haughty features of the well-known member, and pressing forwards by one impulse to view him more closely, broke by one impulse also, into a long, loud shout of salutation, which rang through the sultry air of the late night, quelling in its own thunder the distant roll of the rising storm. It was Titan homage, rendered with the spontaneity of academic applause, and the hoarse roar with which the masses hurl out their gratitude and welcome, grim, wild, half barbaric, yet grand in its deafening echo and intoxicating in its enthusiasm, like every proclamation of the people, which in the Leader of the Hour recognises the virtual Sovereign of the Land.

He whom they thus saluted passed through them, bowing slightly on either side in acknowledgment, with dignity and courtesy; he held the imperious patrician code of his Norman race, he was an Optimat<sup>e</sup> to the core, and the plaudits of the Populares were almost as indifferent to him, almost as disdained by him, as their censure; he had much of the despot, he had nothing of the demagogue. But in those cheers echoed the homage which multitudes yield to a single dominant intellect; in that welcome rang the accla-

mations which greet and confirm command ; in that human thunder, which outpealed the thunder of the skies, his sway was ratified by the nation ; and as his glance swept over the people, and he passed down the narrow path, left him, lined by eager crowds, the Statesman's pulse quickened and beat higher, and the lustre of his eyes gleamed darker with their scornful triumph ; Strathmore tasted to its full sweetness the one lust of his soul—POWER.

O strange unequal portioner called Life ! unjust are its awards and inscrutable its decrees.

The murdered man, who when the summer sun had sunk to rest, had been hurled into his grave, guiltless of all crime save of a too loyal friendship, lay rotting in a foreign land, forgotten from the day when the seal had been set on his sepulchre, by a world which has no time to count its lost.

And his destroyer lived, high in honour amidst men.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE PILGRIMAGE OF EXPIATION.

A SOFT, serene, richly-tinted picture, fairer than a thought of Lancret's, more golden and tranquil than a dream of Claude's, since one hour of sun-light on one stretch of moss, one fruit-laden bough, one changeful brook, outshines and baffles the best that we, vain painters of nature, can ever catch of her glorious loveliness on canvas or palette. Who knows this better than the Masters of the Art?

The setting sun shone on the oriel casements of an antique ivy-covered Elizabethan mansion, and streaming through the unclosed door of an old stone wall, ripened to gold the fruit of an orchard, whose branches nodded through the opening. Far away to the west, wide, calm, limitless, stretched the great ocean, the gleam of the light falling on the white sail of some fisher boat in the offing. Beyond the tangled leaves of trees, shone the glisten of wet sands and the

red boulders of the rocks. In the silence there was no sound but of the birds' last nest-songs, and of the murmuring seas; and under the shelter of dense boughs, shutting out the sun, was a shadowy solitude where nothing came save the fragrance of countless flowers, and nothing was seen save the silent sunlit bay, when the arching branches parted to show the sheen of sand and sea. It was a home fit for Undine, here in the shadow of the leaves, the earth covered with the delicate bells of heath, the foliage filled with the soft movement and music of young birds, the blue waters gleaming through the spaces of the boughs, the silence but the more serene for the lulling cadence of the seas; and she to whom it was consecrated might well have been sketched as Undine, where she sat, with her head slightly drooped and her lips slightly parted. For she was in the earliest years of opening youth, and of a loveliness ethereal, poetic, such as Dante may have prefigured amidst the angel shadows of the *Paradiso*, or Guido Reni have beheld flit through the heaven of his visionary thoughts, too pure, too fair, for the artist to transfer to grosser colouring.

Both poet and painter would have loved that face, but neither could have made it imperishable on written vellum or on tinted canvas; it could no more have been imprisoned to such transcript than the blush on the heath-bells, than the smile on the seas, than the fugitive play of the sunlight. It had a beauty beyond words, beyond Art.

The brow was low and broad, the skin delicate as a white rose-leaf, with the faint flush on the cheeks beautifully fitful; the eyes large, dark, shadowed by their lashes till their violet depths looked black. But what lay beyond poet to phrase, or artist to produce, were not these, but were the spirituality of the whole face vaguely suggestive of too early death, utterly above all grosser passion, all meaner thought of earth, and the touching and nameless contrast of the sunny joyous smile upon the lips with the fathomless sadness of the eyes, of the grace and radiance of childhood with the ethereal melancholy of the features in repose. It was a loveliness like that of the delicate tropic flower which blooms but to perish in all its early beauty; too fragile for the storms and darkness of night, too soilless to wither on earth. She sat there, with the shadow of the thick leaves above her, and around her the melody of the ocean, the music of the birds, and the dreamy hum of bees deep down in the chalice of flowers.

And one unseen, as he stood and watched her, was never weary of gazing on that delicate picture, though it had been familiar to him from his childhood. He was a youth of two-and-twenty, tall, lithe, of a thorough Saxon beauty, with his bright fearless face, his bold blue eyes, his tawny hair, yet he did not suit that scene; he was out of harmony with it, and he broke its spell, even as he broke that of her thoughts, as he put aside the boughs and bent towards her very gently:

"Lucille! where are your dreams?"

She started a little, and looked up at him with a glad smile.

"Nello! I banished you; is this the way you obey? Look! how you frighten the birds and trample the heath."

Lionel Caryll looked sad and repentant as the singers flew from him with a rapid whirr of their wings, and he glanced down on the trodden bells.

"Oh, Lucille, I am sorry! But surely you love me something better than you do those birds and those flowers? *They* feel no pain!"

"I think they do," she said, musingly. "Look how birds' eyes grow wild and piteous when you go near their nests, and how they droop and pine if they lose the one they love; and look how the flowers fade when they are taken from the sun, and wither slowly when they are torn away to die under the pressure of your hand. Ah! I cannot bear to see a flower crushed or broken, Nello. We cannot tell what it may suffer."

Her eyes grew humid and earnest in their dark depths, for the ruling power of her nature, as its fatal danger, was a deep and infinite tenderness, a too keen and too early susceptibility. Young Caryll did not understand her, he did not even follow the thread of her thoughts; in the long years they had spent together, the poetic and profound mind of the child had always been above and beyond the boy's comprehension; they were so now, but now, as then, he felt

for all she did and said a tender and reverent love, as for something at once too holy and too fragile for his rougher hands.

"Who could hurt what you plead for, Lucille?" he said fondly. "But if you give so much compassion to your flowers and birds, give a little to me."

She laughed joyously :

"Pity *you*, Nello! What pity do you want? You are as happy as I am! Why, Nello, you are sunshine itself!"

The young man's bright face laughed sunnily in answer: it was the truth, his nature and his life were both shadowless.

"Yes, but pity me for seeing that the song-birds and the heaths are both dearer to you than I! True they suit you better, Lucille; they are poetic and delicate, and I am neither; but they cannot love you so well!"

In the half-laughing words, in the half-boyish appeal, there was, almost unknown to himself, an inflection of jealous pain, of touching humility, which struck on his listener's ear with some vague sense that she unwittingly had wounded him, though how she knew not. With caressing grace she stooped towards him, where he lay at her feet, and pushed back the tangled hair from his forehead.

"My own dear Nello, I know that! Could you think I rank those things before you? For shame! I thought you knew better how I loved you!"

For the playmate and companion of her childhood

was very dear to her, and it was an impulse with her to soothe all pain, from the flutter of a frightened bird to the sorrow of a human heart; and Lionel Caryll gazed upward with an eager pleasure in his eyes, while his lips were mute: it was the reverent and breathless gaze of the young devotee at the beauty of a Madonna or a Vivia Perpetua, the beauty which is too sacred in his sight to waken passion, or be profaned by aught save a holy worship.

He rose with a smothered sigh as he recollected the object of his errand, for he would gladly have stayed here till the moon rose, with murmur of the sea in his ear and the hand of Lucille softly playing with his hair, in the familiar affection which from her infancy she had shown to, and received from, one whom she called her brother.

"Lucille, Lord Cecil is here—I came to tell you."

"Here!"

"Yes, he has come down for part of the Easter recess; only a day or two, for he is going to Osborne. He bade me fetch you to him."

Ere the words were spoken she had sprung to her feet, dropping the *Vita Nuova* she was reading, and the feathery seaweeds which had lain on her lap, to the ground, and had left him, lightly and swiftly as the flight of a wild bird.

Lionel Caryll stood in the shadow of the leaves, looking after her. From his earliest years, when the young child, orphaned and desolate and unconscious in her glad infancy of her own fate, had

first come to Silver-rest, he had been careful of her every step, jealous of her every smile ; he had followed her like a spaniel and tended her like a woman, and risked his life and limb many a time to bring her down some sea-bird's egg, some flower from the cliffs, some treasure from the waves.

Lucille loved him very fondly, for this child's whole life and nature were tenderness ; but the boy had always felt what he felt now, that two stood before him in her heart—the dead, whose name she cherished with a reverence which was almost a religion, and the one whom she and the world knew as her guardian.

In the deep embrasure of one of the windows sat a man, with a staghound at his feet, and his face in shadow, as Rembrandt or Velasquez painted the faces of the statesmen and conspirators who sought their canvas, to whose portraits, indeed, he bore a strange and striking resemblance, for Strathmore with the flight of years had altered little. The darker traits were more traceable, the better less so ; for in the human face, as in the picture, with time the shadows deepen and the lights grow fainter. The eyes were more searching, the brow more powerful, the features colder and more inscrutable still. Otherwise there was but little change save this, that whereas before, the character of his face had been suggestive of evil passions, dormant and not yet called into play, it now bore the shadow of them from the past, the trace of

fires which had burned to ashes, scorching as they died.

Strathmore, who was God and Law unto himself, had moulded his life with an iron hand, although on that hand was the stain of crime. Submerged for a while under the surge of passion, the ambition which had been drowned under a woman's love had returned to him ; a diplomatic career he had abandoned for public life at home, and he had reared himself from the fires of past crimes to follow one road—Power. Eminence in statecraft, his astute, subtle, and masterly intellect was formed to attain and wield. Under his chill and withering eloquence parties writhed; before his courtly and poignant wit opponents cowered ; beneath the dominance of his will, wavering adherents bowed; and before the silent and profound mind of the successful politician men felt abashed, discomfited, yet governed despite themselves.

Strathmore was great in many things—in his genius, in his endurance, in his power, in his arrogance ; and he had that veiled yet astute will which bends that of all others to its bidding, and governs the minds of men by a resistless, though not seldom an evil, fascination to its sway. To trample out the memories of the past by dissipation was impossible to the man whose intellect was masterly, and who had rioted in the drunkenness of guilt; the revel of orgies was distasteful, the pursuit of licentiousness was contemptible to him. Forgetfulness he sought otherwise, under the iron tramp of mailed ambitions ; or rather, to speak

more truly, forgetfulness he did not court, as weaker men would do ; but as he had kept the mad love which had betrayed him before him, to be avenged brutally and ruthlessly, so he kept the crime which had stained his soul, to be atoned for as though destiny lay in his hands, so he kept the blood-stain on the statue of his Life, to be wrought out by his own hand in after work. For Strathmore, though the pride of his nature had been smitten to the dust, and though he had reeled and fallen under passion, had refused to gather warning from the past, but held it still his to mete out fate to himself and others, as though he were not man but deity.

The sunlight played without, among the leaves while the ocean broke upon the sunny sands, and he sat there in the shadow : on his face was the look of a weary and hopeless melancholy, which never wholly passed away, for the soul of this man, if merciless to others, was not less so to himself ; in spirit he scourged himself for the lives which rested on his, as loathingly as ever Carmelite or Benedictine scourged the body for its sins, and whilst before men's sight his life was cold, unruffled, brilliant, and his "path strewn with the purples" of fame and of power, there were dark hours in his solitude, of remorse, of anguish, of unutterable horror, when the great and fallen nature wrestled with itself, and struggled in its agony nearer to God's light. For *repentance* is a word by a thousand-fold too faint to

utter that with which Strathmore looked back upon the past—looked back upon the homicide guiltier than Cain's.

Suddenly, where he sat in the embrasure, a shadow fell athwart the sunshine without, and raising his eyes he saw the young life which was freighted with his venture of atonement. She stood there in the full golden light, which fell on her fair and shining hair; on her eyes, dark as the violet skies of night, and full of their mournful earnestness; on her lips, which wore the sunny and tender smile of the long-dead, radiant with welcoming joy while words were mute; words could not have spoken half so well!

“Lucille!”

He rose, and she sprang towards him, lifting her fair young face to his gaze, while he stooped and kissed her brow with his accustomed caress, which she received as a child her father's. Her hands closed on his softly and caressingly, her lips were tremulous, her eyes, loving in their earnestness, looked up to his winningly, beseechingly:

“Ah! you are come at last; you have been so long away!”

“So long! You have watched for me, then?”

“My heart watches for you always!”

He smiled; her answer gave him pleasure. Long years before he had set his will to fasten the love and gratitude of this young life upon himself, and every assurance of them were dear to him, for they were

the assurance of his fulfilment of Erroll's trust, of his atonement through the living to the dead.

"And you are happy, Lucille?" he asked her.

She laughed the soft, low laugh of her still lingering childhood, in which pain had been a thing unknown, to which sorrow had been a mystery ever veiled.

"You ask me that so often! 'Happy?' All my life is happiness. I cannot even fancy grief. I try sometimes, and I cannot."

"Thank God!"

The words were spoken low and heartfelt, and he shaded his eyes with his hand as he gazed down on her, while over the coldness of his face stole a warmth and a softness which never came there save when he looked on her. Her singular and poetic loveliness, as she stood before him in the mellow sunlight, with her dark eyes uplifted in their beseeching beauty, struck on him; he saw for the first time that she was passing out of childhood.

"You are changed, Lucille," he said, as she threw herself at his feet, where he sat, in that graceful and trustful abandon which was as natural to her now as when she had first come caressingly to his side on the sea-shore; for this opening life had been left free, pure, untrammelled by art or bondage, as any of the white-winged birds which spent their summer days above the waves.

She looked up incredulous and amused:

"Changed? How can I be in six months?"

“Six months is six years at your age : the passage from childhood to womanhood is very brief ; crossed sometimes in a night, sometimes in an hour !”

“Is it ? But I have not crossed it.”

“No, and I do not wish that you should.”

She lifted her eyes to his, full of that appealing earnestness which gave them so strange a sadness, so touching a beauty.

“No more do I. When time rolls on, the shadows deepen across the dial in the orchard, and the sands of the shore ; so they say they do in life. Is it true, Lord Cecil ?”

“Fatally true, my child.”

She shuddered slightly :

“Ah ! and that is why I wish mine could rest for ever where it is. I am so happy, and I dread the shadow ! In shade the flowers die, you know, killed by the darkness and thirsting for the sun ; so should I.”

“Hush, hush, Lucille !” he said, passionately, as he drew her towards him, where she sat at his feet. “‘Dread ?’ ‘Darkness ?’ What have they to do with you ? Neither shall ever touch you. Your future is my care ; think of it as what it will be, *shall* be, as fair and cloudless as your past and present. No shadow shall ever fall on you !”

“Not under your shelter !”

And as she spoke gratefully and caressingly, the smile was on her face which still smote him as with steel, and she bent towards him with that tender and

trustful grace natural to her from her earliest infancy: she loved the hand which fostered her—the hand stained with her father's blood.

The human life which the last words of the man he loved had bequeathed to him in trust, was dear to Strathmore as the dead had once been; and when remorse had struck prostrate the granite of his nature, in the chasm left, this single softness had been sown and taken root; even as on the chill and isolated mountains ice-covered and inaccessible, deep down in some cleft and hidden rent, lives some delicate blue alpine flower. Begotten of remorse, born of a thirst for atonement, and fostered by a passionate, almost a morbid, craving to fulfil to the uttermost Erroll's latest bidding, his tenderness for Lucille had become the one holy and unselfish thing in a heart to which the gentler and purer feelings of human nature and of human ties were by nature alien.

Strathmore's haughty and sin-stained soul hung on this young and fragile girlhood for its single chance and power of atonement. It was not *she* for whom he cared; it was the dead. Had the last words of the man he had wronged and hurled from earth, condemned him to endless self-chastisement, or self-sacrifice, he would have obeyed them equally, nor spared himself one iota of their enjoined torture. Pitiless to others, I say he was not less pitiless to himself; his life, stained with great crimes, was riven with a great remorse; his nature was like those lofty and darkened ones which first filled the cells of Clairvaux

and the ranks of Loyola; natures passion-stained and crime-steeped, but which, even as they had spared none in their guilt, spared not themselves in their expiation.

The trust bequeathed him, and bound upon him, by the weight of the two lives which his act had struck from earth, he fulfilled sacredly. His hand had orphaned her, but his hand sheltered her, and was prodigal in the wealth, and care, and luxury with which it surrounded her; it seemed to Strathmore as though thus, and thus alone, could he atone to him who had given her life. In his mother's home she had grown from infancy to early youth, fondly nurtured, and trained to know that it was from him as her guardian that she received all which made her young years so joyous. Those to whom her education was entrusted he forbade to use any laws with her save those of gentleness, and directed to surround her with all tenderness, to shield her from every touch of pain or harshness, and to indulge her in all things. He was scrupulously obeyed, and the result might have been to many natures dangerous; with Lucille, the inherent character was too loving and too sweet to be thus harmed, to do aught but expand to all its richest luxuriance, its purest delicacy, in the constant sunlight in which it grew, though, as the hot-house flower is rendered unfit for the cold winds without by the warmth which surrounds it, so might this nature be for the harsh conflicts of life. But, then, these she was never to know—from these she

would be sheltered, as the exotic is, through the whole of its brief and radiant life.

In pursuance of Erroll's desire, he trained himself to speak to this child often and calmly of her father, as of one lost and dear to him as to herself, until Lucille held, inseparably interwoven and beloved in her memory, the dead, and the living to whom the dead had bequeathed her, and who filled his place. It had been hard to say which were the dearer to her, the ideal of her father which she cherished, or the love for Strathmore which grew with her growth. No instinct had made her shrink in infancy from the hand which was stained with her father's blood ; no prescience now warned her that he who fostered her was her father's foe. All her joy, all her gifts, came from him ; for her, his eyes were ever softened, his voice was ever gentle ; the distant visits he paid her were sealed with gold in her life, radiating every day they graced with a glory ever missed in his absence. And thus Erroll's young child grew up in her graceful loveliness, her happy innocence, with no shadow allowed to fall on her from the dark tragedy which had orphaned her almost from her birth, but with a deep and reverent love for him, between whom and herself, had she known the truth hid from her, there would have yawned a hideous and impassable gulf, there would have stretched a fell abyss of crime which would have made her shrink from every touch of his hand, shudder from every caress of his lips.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE CABINET MINISTER.

A KNOT of lords and gentlemen, diplomatists and ministers, were grouped together in the ante-room at St. James's, after attending a Levée—the last of the season—chatting while awaiting a chance of getting to their carriages through the crowd, where torn shoulder-knots, trampled epaulettes, the débris of gold lace, fragments of bullion, broken plumes, or shreds of order ribbons, bore witness to the severity of the conflict, which is a portion of the ceremonial attendant on the Germanised Court of England.

“But V—— gained so much by the Schönbrun Treaty; he is far too exigeant,” said the French Ambassador, alluding to the subject under discussion, which was the aggression of a petty Duke, who might chance to embroil Western Europe; European tempests not seldom being brewed in a Liliputian teacup.

"But others gained, too, by the treaty," suggested an English Minister, "and grapes shared are poisoned to most gatherers. With a whole bunch to ourselves, we grudge the broken stalk that we leave behind."

"*Hein ! c'est vrai !*" laughed a Prussian Statesman, applying himself to his tabatière. "Still if he were decently wise he would be content."

"Is it wise to be content?" smiled the English Minister; and his smile was cold and ironic. "What duller atmosphere possible than Contentment? A satisfied man has nothing to desire, gain, or contest; he is a mould-grown carp in stagnant waters——"

"Which are the quietest," added the Prussian, who had too much slow Teuton blood in him not to relish "stagnant waters." "I suppose V—— thinks with you, or he would never thrust forth such claims; he knows the Federation will never acknowledge them."

"But they will foment disturbance; they will draw the eyes of Europe on him for half a dozen months, and many would rather be decorated like Midas, than move unnoticed and unknown in

*secretum iter et fallentis semita vita,*"

said the English Statesman, with a contemptuous laugh, cold, slight, and clear.

"Et puis," said the Ambassador, with a slight shrug; "the opportunity was tempting. Man was created a dishonest animal, and policy and civilisation have raised the instinct to a science."

"And what he seeks now is for 'Patriotism.' Let none of us forget that. 'Pro Patria' is so admirable a plunder-cry; I don't know a better, unless it be 'Pro Deo,'" smiled the Englishman, whose own *cri de guerre* was, with but little disguise, "Pro Ego."

Standing at a little distance, wedged in by the titled and decorated mob, a man looked at him as he spoke; the words were inaudible where the other stood, but the smile he saw and knew of old, he had seen it on his lips when the sun sank down beyond the purple shroud of mist, seen it as the duellist stooped to watch the dark blood slowly trailing through the grasses, with the passionate and cruel lust which branded him assassin. Raoül de Valdor had long forgot that hour, from the indifference of custom to a life so taken, and by long years passed in a fashionable whirl. At the time it had chilled and revolted him from the man who, with deliberate purpose, had slain his friend with the unerring aim and greed with which a tiger darts upon his prey, insatiate to destroy and indifferent to destruction. But their intercourse had remained the same, and the remembrance had drifted into the mist of long past things. It rarely recurred to him, yet it did so now, standing in the thronged ante-chamber of the palace, when glancing at the successful Statesman, with the ribbon crossed on his breast, and the cold courtly smile on his lips, there arose before him, sudden and distinct, the memory of that summer night, with the

hootng of the shrill cicala, and the sullen surge of the noisome waters as the reptiles stirred amongst their reeds, and the last rays of the evening sun gleaming above the storm-cloud as the dying man reeled and fell.

He looked at Strathmore as he stood among his peers ; and, strange, dissimilar, unbidden, the scene rose up before the memory of the inconsequent and thoughtless Frenchman, as he stood among the court crowd of St. James's. Yet he had been present at many such scenes, and the value of life taken had never weighed on him, nor its memory ever remained with him, before. In his creed of honour duels were blameless ; in his country's custom they were habitual. What long ago had revolted the dashing and daring spirit (which with many faults and many follies had something of the old code of the gallant gentlemen who had fought and died for the White Lilies) had been the pitiless *purpose* which he had read ere the shot had been fired, and which had borne in his sight the fixed and treacherous intent of the murderer. It was this which he remembered now.

The throng parted, the knot of ministers separated, Strathmore came forward to go to his carriage, and Valdor moved also ; they met, as they had done a hundred times, since that night by the Deer-pond of the old Bois.

“ Ah ! you Valdor ? Charmed to see you. I had no idea you were in England, much less at the Levée.

Insufferably warm, isn't it? Such a press!" said Strathmore, giving his hand to the man who, sixteen years before, had whispered in his ear, "*Fuyez! il est mort,*" unheeded, as he stooped to sever the gold flake of the hair which trailed among the dark dew-laden grasses.

"Such wretched rooms!" laughed Valdor, as he glanced contemptuously through the reception-chambers, unaltered since Queen Anne. "I only arrived yesterday. I have come to town on family matters—a disputed inheritance affair. But permit me, mon ami, to offer my congratulations on your recent honours; never was a finer political victory won. Your coup d'état was supreme!"

Strathmore smiled.

"You give me and my party too much distinction; we only effected, dully and slowly, by speeches and leaders, what you over the water would have done in a week by a few cannon-balls and closed barrières. But the British mind refuses the quick argument of a fusillade—as if it were not as wise to be convinced by a bullet as by a newspaper! Will you do me the pleasure to drive home with me?"

They pioneered their way through the aristocratic mob, and reaching the air at last, after the heated atmosphere of the densely-packed palace, passed to Strathmore's carriage, while the crowds without, waiting to see the courtiers leave the Levée, crushed themselves close to the wheels, and rushed under the

horses' heads, and pushed and jostled, and trampled each other, in eager curious haste to see the favourite Minister—he who, could he have had his way, would have ruled them with a rod of iron, and swept his path clear from all who dared dispute his power, by the curt Cæsarean argument of armed hosts!

"Have you any engagements for to-night, Valdor?" he asked, as the carriage moved.

"None. I was going to dine at the Guards' club, and look in at the Opera."

"Give me the pleasure of your society, then. I have a State dinner this evening; the cruellest penalty of Place! Though truly it is selfish, perhaps, to ask you to throw over that most graceful of all sylphs, La Catarina, for ministerial proprieties."

"The egotism, at least, does me much honour. I shall be most happy. Your season is pretty well over, Strathmore; you eat your farewell whitebait soon?"

"To-morrow. I shall leave town in a week or two; the session will virtually close then."

"Where are you going, *après*? White Ladies?"

"Not yet. I shall be there the last days in August, when I hope you will join us. Völms and plenty of people will be down; and by all they send me word, the broods are very abundant and the young deer in fine condition. No; I go from town into Devon to see my mother, stay there three or four days, and then start for Baden, give a week coming back to

Fontainebleau with His Majesty, your execration, and to White Ladies by the First."

"You go into Devon next week?"

"Or the week after. Why?"

"Because I am bound there. Perhaps you remember I have English blood in me by the distaff side? and there is a property down there which ought, I think, to be mine by rights, at least it needs looking into; *pas grand' chose*, but valuable to a poor wretch a million or two of francs in debt. I must make investigations at your Will Office ('Doctors' Commons,' n'est ce pas? 'Doctors,' because it has the testaments of those the doctors have killed; and 'Commons,' because it is common to nobody who hasn't the money to pay the fees. You English have a grim humour!). We can go down to the south together, Strathmore?"

"Certainly." (Valdor did not note that the answer was slightly constrained, and halted a moment.) "Where is this property you name?"

"Bon Dieu! I don't know! The place is—peste! it is in my papers but it is out of my head!—wait a moment—is—is—Torlynne, surely, or some such title."

"Indeed! That is close to my mother's jointure house of Silver-rest. I remember it is a disputed title, an old moated priory with fine timber, but wholly neglected."

Valdor twisted his scented moustaches with a yawn of ennui:

“*Vous me faites frémir!* What on earth should I do with a ‘moated priory?’ It sounds like a ghost-story! However, I shall go down and prove my title if I can; for I suppose it will sell for something?”

“Undoubtedly. Since you will require to be on the spot, I am sure I need not say that Lady Castlemere will be most happy to see you at Silver-rest, if you like to stay with us.”

Valdor thanked the kindly Fates which thus, by a fortunate chance, preserved him from the horrors of Devonian hotels, and accepted Strathmore’s invitation, proffered from a cause he little guessed. Strathmore had heard of his intended visit to the south with annoyance, almost, for the instant, with apprehension; it was this which made him hesitate, and but coldly consent to the suggestion that they should travel together. He knew that Valdor had heard those last words breathed with a broken sigh, “Lucille! Lucille!” and he dreaded to see the child of Erroll in the presence of one who had been with him in that hour. But as instantly he remembered that do what he would, Valdor, compelled to visit Torlynne, would certainly pay a visit of compliment to Lady Castlemere, and, living on the same solitary shore with Silver-rest, could not fail to meet Lucille. Therefore, with that policy which he used in trivial as in great matters, he disarmed all danger by meeting it *d'avance*; any act unusual on his part might have wakened Valdor’s curiosity or wonder concerning the lovely child whom he would find there as his ward; to in-

vite him at once beneath the same roof with her was to avoid, entirely, exciting that piqued interest which, though no link remained to guide him by any possibility towards the truth, might yet have induced him to inquire much that would have been difficult to satisfy.

The foresight was wise, the reasoning just, the inference and expectation both rightly founded; yet —woe for us, mes frères!—the surest barriers raised by men's prevision are but as houses builded on the sands, which one blast of shifting winds, one sweep of veering waves, may hurl down into dust.

“What spell have you about you, mon cher?” said Valdor, two hours later, in the drawing-rooms of Strathmore's residence, as he threw himself into a dormeuse. Time had passed lightly over Valdor, and left him much the same—a gay, débonnaire, brilliant, French noble, whose fortunes were not equal to his fashion, in whom a transparent impetuosity mingled in odd anomaly with the languor of the world, in whom the fire of the South outlived the indifferentism of habit, and who, with many follies and some errors, had honour in his heart and truth in his tongue. He looked younger than he was, with his delicate brune tint, his soft, black eyes, his careless and chivalrous grace; and the man in whose society he now was looked on him disdainfully as “bon enfant,” because his hot passions were short-lived, and the nonchalance of his nature made him candid as a child.

Strathmore raised his eyebrows :

“ ‘ Spell ! ’ What a romantic word ! How do you mean it ? ”

Valdor laughed, throwing back the dark waves of his hair ; he was a little vain of his personal beauty.

“ I mean to account for your perpetual success. You command success as if you had all the genii of fable to back you. Men censure you, oppose you, hate you, inveigh against you, and you have a strong party of foes, but they never contrive to defeat you.”

“ Well, I am not very tolerant of defeat.”

“ Pardieu ! who is ? But most of us have to swallow it sometimes. What I want to know is how you succeed in perpetually compelling your enemies to drink it, and avoiding one drop of the amari aliquid yourself ! ”

Strathmore smiled ; the frank expression of curiosity and opinion amused him ; he had himself the trained reticence of the school of Machiavelli, and years had of necessity polished his skill in the knowledge “ how to hold truth and how to withhold it,” once laid down by him as the first law of wisdom and of success.

“ You ask for a précis of my policy ! You know I invariably contended that what men choose to accomplish they may compass sooner or later, if they use just discernment, and do not permit themselves to be run away with by Utopian fancies or paradoxical motives. Let every one make up his mind to be baffled in what he undertakes nineteen times, but to succeed on the twentieth ; I would warrant him success before he has reached half the score.”

"That tells me nothing!" said Valdor, petulantly, though, in truth, it was this very inflexible and long-enduring patience, which nothing could dissuade or daunt, that was the key of Strathmore's rise to power. "Well! you must keep your secret, mon ami, and I dare say it has too much science and subtlety in it to lie in a nutshell. But as for your theory, which makes one think of the Bruce Spider-tale—peste!—it won't answer always. Look at *us*; we persevere for ever, and never succeed!"

Strathmore smiled slightly; he knew Valdor referred to the efforts of his own French party, and the loyal Utopia of a Quixotic and chivalric clique, found little sympathy with a statesman the distinguishing and most popular characteristic of whose politics was their entire freedom from all ideology or vagueness.

"Mon cher! I spoke of a man who pursued a certain definite goal and power for himself, not of those leagued together for the chase of a shadowy chimera. To seek a palpable aim and a palpable ascendancy is one thing; to embrace a visionary crusade and an ideal flock of theories is another. *I* mean blasting a rock with rational materials and science; *you* mean climbing the clouds with ropes of sand!"

"Then," said Valdor, impatiently, with a dash of envy and a dash of intolerance—"then it would appear that the wise man consecrates his labours and his ambitions to the advancement of himself; it is only the fool who wastes both on mankind!"

"Certainly," smiled Strathmore. "Who ever doubted it?"

At that moment the doors of the vestibule were thrown open, and the first of the guests bidden to his State dinner was announced: further tête-à-tête was ended.

Strathmore was not popular among his colleagues; his personal coldness and his consummate indifference to how he wounded, repelled men, the generosity of feeling and the cordiality which in earlier years had been very strong to the few whom he liked, were gone. Although his liberality was as extensive, it seemed rather to proceed from disdain of wealth than any kindlier feeling, and though at times great and even noble deeds were traced to him done in privacy, they appeared rather to come from some rigid law set to himself than from any warmer feeling toward humanity. But his ascendancy was indisputable, his intellect priceless to his party, and the brilliancy of his career without a rival; and men rallied about him, and confessed his influence as the most prominent politician of his day, and the assured leader of the future.

Valdor looked at him as he sat that night at the head of the table entertaining many of the most distinguished men of his country and time, fellow-Ministers and foreign Ambassadors, while the light from the chandeliers above, flashing off the gold and silver plate, the many-hued exotics, the snowy Parian statuettes, and the bright-bloomed fruits, fell upon

his face with its peculiar Vandyke type, in which were blent the haughty melancholy of Charles Stuart with the statesmanlike power of Strafford, the serenity of a fathomless repose with the darkness of passions untameable if aroused.

Valdor looked at him as Strathmore drank his Red Hermitage and exchanged light witticisms with the French Representative, and again, unbidden and unwelcome before the thoughtless mercurial mind of the dashing and languid *lion*, rose the memory of that night in the Bois de Boulogne, and of the tiger-lust with which the death spasm had been watched to slacken and grow still.

"*He* has forgotten!" thought Valdor, with marvel, admiration, revulsion, loathing, all commingled. "He slew without pity; he lives without remorse."

So rashly do men judge who draw inferences from the surface; so erringly do they condemn who see not the solitude wherein the soul is laid bare!

## CHAPTER XIX.

AMONG THE LILIES OF THE VALLEY.

THE afternoon sun was warm on land and sea, and a light amber haze was lying on the soft outline of the hills, the stretches of golden gorse, and the glisten of the moistened sands, as a steam-yacht which had come down channel from the Solent, and rounded the coast, anchored in the little bay of Silver-rest, where nothing was ever seen save the fishing-smacks and tiny craft of the scattered population, whose few rough-hewn shingle cottages nestled under one of the bluffs.

"There is your Torlynne, Valdor," said Strathmore, pointing to some gable-ends which arose some mile or two off in the distance above masses of woodland, as they walked up from the shore. They were expected at Silver-rest, but the day of their arrival had been left uncertain, as he had not known when he might get finally free. Strathmore allowed him-

self little leisure in office ; he never appeared either hurried or occupied, but he burnt the candle of his life at both ends, as most of us do in this age, and must do, if we would be of any note in it.

“ Ah, pardieu ! I wish it were an hotel in the Rue de Grammont instead !” laughed Valdor, as he glanced across. “ Not but that, I dare say I shall never get it, unless I languish through your Chancery till I am eighty. I shall hear the verdict is given in my favour, just when I am receiving the Viaticum !”

“ I hope better things ; it is a vast pity it should moulder unowned. Meanwhile, the litigation befriends me with a most agreeable companion during my exile at Lady Castlemere’s. I fear you will be terribly bored, Valdor ; my mother lives in strict retirement.”

“ Another instance of those who once ruled the world abjuring it in advancing life. What years it is since I had the honour of seeing her. I was a little fellow—a court-page, proud of my blue and silver ! Does she live alone, then ?”

“ Oh, no ; merely away from the world. She has a grandson with her, a lad at college ; and also a ward of hers and of mine, little more than a child as yet, Lucille de Vocqsal.”

“ De Vocqsal ? An Austrian name, isn’t it ?”

“ No, Hungarian ; it may be Austrian, too, however—*is*, indeed, I think, now you name it. You must expect to find Silver-rest dull—it has nothing to boast of but its sea-board.”

"And its country," added Valdor, as they passed through the lodge gates.

Strathmore glanced carelessly over the magnificent expanse of woodland and moorland, hill and ocean, which stretched around.

"Yes; but that has not much compensative attraction for either you or me, I fancy."

They went on in silence, smoking, through the grounds, which were purposely left in much of the wildness and luxuriance of their natural formation, with here and there great boulders of red rock bedded in the moss, and covered with heaths and creepers, and Strathmore looked up in surprise as a sudden exclamation from Valdor fell on his ear.

"Bon Dieu! Look there. How lovely!"

Strathmore glanced to where Valdor pointed, marvelling that the landscape should rouse him to so much admiration, for the fashionable French Noble was not likely to be astonished into any enthusiastic adoration of the pastoral beauty of nature, or the sun-given smile on the seas.

What he saw was this.

A rock of dark sandstone overhung the turf below, forming a natural chamber, whose walls were the dense screen of tangled creepers and foliage pendent from its ledges, or the great ferns which reared to meet them, and whose carpet was the moss covered with lilies of the valley, which grew profusely where the tempered sun rays fell through cool leaves and twisted boughs, flickering and parted.

And under its shelter from the heat, half buried in the flowers, lying in the graceful abandon of a child's repose, resting her head upon her hand in the attitude of Guido's "Leggiatura," her eyes veiled as they rested on her book, one sunbeam streaming through the fan-like ferns above, touching her hair to gold and shining on the open page she read, was Lucille.

The steps of both were involuntarily arrested as they came upon her in her solitude; there was something of sanctity in that early loveliness,

Soft, as the memory of buried love;  
Pure, as the prayer which childhood wafts above—

that silenced both him to whom it was familiar, and him to whom it was unknown. Then Strathmore turned to move onward through the grounds; he felt repugnance to break in on her repose, or to meet her in the presence of the one who had heard the dying lips faintly whisper the name she bore, in their last farewell to her lost mother.

But Valdor put his hand upon his shoulder.

"Wait for Heaven's sake! Who is she?"

"A lovely child, but no more than that as yet.  
My ward, Lucille de Vocqsal."

"Mort de Dieu! She is the most beautiful poem, picture—Heaven knows what—that ever I beheld. Make her lift those eyes; what must the face be when they are raised?"

"You will see her later on," answered Strathmore, coldly. "I shall not disturb her now; she is very

young, and would not understand our having pried on her in her haunt. And pray do not use that flowery language to her ; youth flattered into vanity is ruined, and you would talk in an unknown tongue there."

He moved away, and Valdor, something surprised and something annoyed, prepared to follow him with a lingering backward gaze. But it was too late ; a squirrel swinging downward from the boughs above made Lucille raise her eyes. She saw Strathmore, and, with a low cry, wild in its gladness, sprang from her couch among the lilies, and flew to meet him. Midway, she saw, too, that he was not alone ; and paused, hesitating, with the colour, delicate as the rose flush on a sea shell, deepening in her cheek. She knew by instinct that Strathmore was haughtily reticent before all auditors, and although too highly bred and nurtured to know embarrassment, she had something of the beautiful wild shyness of the young fawn with those who were strange to her.

A shudder ran through Strathmore's veins as he perceived her standing before them there in the sultry mellow haze ; while the eyes of his companion rested on her—the eyes which had watched with him the shadows steal over the face, and the convulsion shiver through the limbs of her father, in the summer-night of years long gone.

Then he moved forward and greeted her with all his accustomed gentleness, less tenderly than when they were alone—but to that she had long been used

when any other was present at their meeting—and led her towards Valdor.

“Lucille, allow me to introduce to you one of my oldest and most valued friends.”

“Pardieu!” thought the Frenchman; as after a graceful acknowledgment of his salutation, none the less graceful, but the more, from that delicate proud shyness which was like the coy gaze of the deer, Lucille turned to Strathmore with low, breathless words of joyous welcome, and the radiance of that smile at which the sadness fled from off her face, as though banished by a spell. “Pardieu! when was anything more exquisite ever born; it is not mortal; it is the face of an angel. I have seen something like it, too, somewhere; now she smiles it looks familiar. Perhaps it is some head of Guido, some fantasy of Carlo Dolci, that she makes me remember. She seems to love her guardian; is she the only thing on earth he does not ice? The last man living, I should have supposed, that would have taken such an office; however, it may be done from generosity here. Strathmore would ruin his friend without mercy if he stood in his way, or awoke his passions; but he would give royally to his deadliest enemy who asked him in need. A bad man sometimes; a dangerous man always; but a mean man, or a false man, never!”

Which fugitive thoughts flitting through the volatile and reckless mind of Valdor, which seldom stayed to sift or criticise, were just enough in their deduction,

drawing one of those haphazard truths by instinct, for which patient and shrewd observation often toil half a lifetime in vain.

"What were you reading there among the lilies of the valley, Lucille?" asked Strathmore, as they passed onward through the grounds, while her head was ever turning with a graceful, upward movement to look on him, and her eyes were ever seeking his with their loving, reverent regard, as though she could scarcely believe in the actual joy of his presence. They were but few and rapid visits which he paid her, but they were remembered passionately from time to time. The fairest summer lost its beauty if he never came with its golden promise; the dreariest winter was glad and bright with all the warmth of spring in her sight if it brought her but a few hours of his presence. From the moment when as a little child on the sea-shore she had asked him his name that she might say it in her prayers, Lucille had clung to the memory of Strathmore with a strange and deepened fondness far beyond her years.

"I had taken *Æschylus* and *Euripides*."

"You can read them in the original then, mademoiselle?" asked Valdor, in surprise.

"Lucille learns very rapidly, I believe," answered Strathmore for her. "She has been taught chiefly what she fancied to study, and one of those fairy fancies was Greek. I believe merely because she had heard how the sea she loves was loved in Hellas —was it not, Lucille?"

She smiled, and looked over to the sunny waters.

"Well! I can fancy how the Ten Thousand clashed their bucklers for wild joy, and shouted 'Thalassis! Thalassis!' to the beautiful dancing waves. I love the ocean! It is a music that is never silent, a poem that is never exhausted. When I die I should like my grave to be beside the sea."

"Death for you, mademoiselle!" broke in Valdor, while his eloquent southern eyes dwelt on her with admiration. "The gods have lavished on you every fairest gift, but they will be too merciful to those who look on you, to show their love towards so bright a life, in the way the Greek poets deemed the gentlest."

Lucille raised her eyes to his with something of surprise; she was unused to the suave subtleties of flattery, while a shadow stole over her face, such as an artist would let steal over the young face of Proserpine or of Procris whilst yet they lived their virginal life amongst the flowers, the shadow of that unknown future which lay awaiting them coiled in the folded leaves of yet unopened years.

"I wonder they chose early death as the gentlest fate," she said, softly; "to die in youth, to leave all the warmth of life for the loneliness of the grave, to grow blind to the light of the sun, and deaf to the voices we love, and to lie alone there, dead, while the birds are waking, and the wind is blowing over the flowers, and the day has dawned for all but us! Oh, who could choose it?"

The words, spoken with the unconsciousness of childhood, yet with the utterance of a poet, were very touching, and silenced both who heard her; one they smote with the memory of that dawn when the birds had sung under the leaves, and the rejoicing earth had waked to gladness, and alone amidst that waking life had lain in rigid stillness the brother he had slain.

, “She knows nothing of that past story, or she would not speak thus of death to him,” thought Valdor, moved and impressed by this beautiful child, whom he had seen among the lilies: she was a study so new to him.

“Æschylus and Euripides have saddened you, Lucille,” said Strathmore, as he moved a wild rose-bough from her path. “Those tragedies of curse and crime are far too gloomy for you.”

“Oh no, I love them!” she answered him, with the ardent eloquence natural to her, and cultured, not fettered, by education; “they are grand, they are like a sea-storm by night! And they are so human through their grandeur too; the Eumenides may be fable, metaphor, spirit-allegory, what it will, but while *one* man sins, Orestes will be mortal, and will live? That guilt wrought in a moment’s vengeance; that burden bound upon the murderer for ever; those ghastly shapes which follow him, though to all other sight he is alone; they surely are true for all time while crime is still on earth!”

“And there is a crime yet more accursed than Orestes—Orestes’ victim was *guilty!*”

Her thoughts had been uttered from an imagination freshly steeped in the solemn verse of the tragic poet; his answer broke, beyond all check of will or power, from the sleepless remorse of conscience, stung into one momentary bitter *Meâ Culpa*.

Past the ear of the young girl it drifted harmless, revealing nothing, and like an utterance of an unknown tongue: his companion knew whence the words sprang, and thought,

“I did him wrong: *that* was remorse.”

Strathmore caught his look, and his proud and disdainful nature shrank in wrath from its generous compassion. After long years of constant intimacy, through whose whole tenour this man had never seen deeper than the rest of the world saw, nor probed his silken social vest to the iron cross worn beneath, Strathmore knew that he had betrayed his secret to him. Sensitive, and intolerant of intrusion, he represented pity yet more than insult.

The clear, silvered moonlight fell on Lucille’s face that evening where she sat beside the open window in the twilight, which at her entreaty had not yet been banished from the chamber, though in the inner drawing-room beyond the chandeliers were lit, and Valdor and Strathmore’s private secretary were playing closely contested *écarté*.

The stillness was unbroken. Lady Castlemere sat

silent, a stately and noble woman, who bore her seventy years with dignity, though attenuated by bodily infirmity; in whose glance was still the fire, and in whose features the arrogance of earlier years, though both were tempered now by a touching and chastened gentleness. Her grandson, Lionel Caryll, was silent also; though bold and careless enough ordinarily, he feared his uncle; to him as to all youths Strathmore had always been cold and negligent; in the presence of the profound man of the world, the able and subtle statesman, the chill and brilliant courtier, he felt abashed, shy, ill at ease, and the polished ice of tone and manner froze the boy's frank young heart. The stillness was unbroken, save by the sound of the waves from without, or the noise of a grasshopper under the leaves, whilst the moon shone on the silvered sea, calm and phosphor-lighted; and Strathmore where he sat looked at Lucille, as, with her head bowed slightly, and her dark wistful eyes gazing out on the night, the starry radiance fell about her.

With much that was dissimilar, she had all the brightness and delicacy of her father's beauty, though upon it was a vague, intangible shadow of sadness, as though the tragedy of his fate had left an unconscious melancholy on the life which took its existence from him. Strathmore saw and noted this; he had done so often, and it always smote him with keen dread; for every touch of sorrow which could have fallen on her he would have held as a breach in his fulfilment

of her father's trust. His eyes rested on her, and his thoughts filled with the thronging shapes and memories of the past. Forbidden intrusion in the press of the world, trodden down in the path of power, dashed aside by the mailed hand of a successful and unscrupulous ambition, they coiled about him *here*, and would not be appeased. While she smiled up into his face; while he spoke to her calmly of her father; while he bent his will to rivet her affection and her gratitude, a vain remorse was on him. As in monkish times, those whose lives were fair in the sight of men, and who wielded the sword as the sceptre of sway over the world, came to the dark sepulchre and the blood-steeped scourge for their chastisement, so he came for his into the fair and innocent presence of this young life.

He sat long silent, looking on her where she gazed out to the moonlit sea, his thoughts in the travail of the past; and he slightly started as his mother, who was near him, spoke:

“Lucille will soon cease to be a child!”

“Not yet—not yet!” he answered hastily, and almost with pain. “In Heaven's name, let her guard her childhood over all the years she can!”

“Surely, but it will flee of itself beyond our arrest. One touch will soon scare it for ever.”

“Accursed be the touch that does!”

Lionel Caryll heard, and looked at him, and the young man shuddered as he caught the look on Strathmore's face; he did not know that the sole

feeling which prompted Strathmore's words was a passionate wish that the childhood—so easy to gladden, so easy to shield—could be prolonged for ever; a passionate fear, which crossed him for the moment, lest, when she should be no longer child but woman, others beyond his control should make shipwreck of the life in whose innocence, peace, and protection his atonement lay.

Their words did not reach her ear, but the sound of them roused her from her reverie, and she came and knelt before him with her hands crossed on his.

“Lord Cecil, I have something to beg of you.”

He looked down into her large soft eyes.

“Of me, Lucille? You know you never ask in vain.”

She laughed with a child's gay joy.

“Ah, how good you are! I want you to let me come and see White Ladies?”

“White Ladies! Why there?”

“Because it is your home. It is not far away, and I should so love to see it. It must be such a grand and stately place, with its cloisters and its forests! I have read of it in the archives, and chronicles, and legends. I know them all by heart! And they frighten me, some of them—that one, with its terrible burden :

Swift silent Strathmore's eyes  
Are fathomless and darkly wise,  
No wife nor leman sees them smile,  
Save at bright steel or statecraft wile,  
And when they lighten foes are 'ware,  
The shrive is short the shroud is there!

It is not true of the name either now. Your eyes are not cruel, and your hand never harmed any!"

The innocent, half-laughing words struck him like a dagger's thrust ;—the legend on her lips which had been on Marion Vavasour's, prophetic of the guilt into which his passion and a woman's lie would hurl him! The sickly memory of the Domino Blanc passed over him ; more horrible in all its remembered brilliance and beguiling, than any scenes of misery and torture. He heard the very ring of the masker's laugh, so mockingly sweet, so lureingly fatal ! He lived in that hour again fresh as though it had been but yesterday ! He shuddered, and in the moonlight the pale bronze of his cheek grew whiter ; but Strathmore, a courtier and a statesman, had not now to learn the lesson of self-control, of calm impassibility. He smiled :

" Why take pleasure in those dark legends of a benighted age, Lucille ?—they have nothing in common with you, you fair child ! What I have brought you befit you much better. Come, let us see how you like them !"

He stretched out his hand, and took from the table, where he had lain them earlier in the evening, some cases of pink pearls as costly in their value as they were delicate in setting and in hue ; he was prodigal of all that could either amuse or adorn her, but, from her age, these were the first jewels he had brought her, and, stooping, he clasped their bands of gold upon her arms, throat, and hair. The white moon-

light fell about her where she knelt before him, on the graceful abandon of her attitude, on her face, up-raised as a child lifts it in prayer, and he watched the flush on her cheeks, the breathless pleasure on her lips. Every time he saw her glance lighten, and her lips laugh, *through him*, he felt that so far the trust of Erroll was fulfilled, that so far his atonement was wrought out, that so far his expiation might claim to wash out the sin.

"Ah! how beautiful they are, and how kind of you to bring them!" she whispered him, rapidly and caressingly. "You have always some new thought for me. Look how they gleam and glisten in the moonlight! What jewels are they? They have the blush of a wild-rose——"

"And of your cheek," said Strathmore, with a smile

She laughed: reared in innocence and seclusion, she was wholly unaware of her own loveliness, and flattery had never polluted her ear nor profaned her heart. She had the fairest charm of youth—unconsciousness. Then her eyes, uplifted to his, grew earnest; she leaned slightly forward towards him, and her voice changed from its breathless pleasure to a tender and almost saddened earnestness:

"Ah! how good and generous you are to always give me pleasure; and yet, do you know—do you know—I sometimes wish you did not give me half so much, that I might show you better how Lucille loves you! I sometimes wish that you were not rich and great, but poor, so that you might know how little it

is *these* I care for ; a lily of the valley, a heron's feather, a forest squirrel from White Ladies, would be as dear to me if from *your* hand. It is so little to love those who give us joy ; the proof of love is to endure in pain !"

"God forbid that you should prove yours so!"

Her words moved him ; any evidence of her affection was welcome for the sake of the dead, yet every evidence of it struck him with a pang of remorse. This child, who caressed his hand as the one from which she received all joy and blessing, would have shuddered in horror from its touch had she known the life it had blasted from earth !

"Do not wish that, Lucille," he added, gently. "I need no proof of what I know. Remember, I read your heart like an open book, and can see all that is written there."

She smiled, a sweet and trustful smile.

"Yes! I forgot ; only sometimes I wish that I could *prove* it to you. While you make me so happy, what value is there in gratitude ? The very dogs love the hand that feeds them ! But, Lord Cecil, you have not told me—may I come to White Ladies ?"

"Some day, perhaps."

But as Strathmore put her tenderly aside, and rose to approach his mother, he thought, with a shudder, of the dark shadow which lay athwart that threshold, making it impure for her fair and innocent youth to cross. White Ladies !—where a fatal love had trampled aside all laws of hospitality and honour ; where the beginning of that ghastly tragedy had

opened, only to close when the sun went down upon his wrath, and the dying sigh trembled through the silence; where her father's memory filled every chamber, haunted every familiar place, and peopled the vacant air, with the thronging phantoms of a vain remorse!

As he had entered the room from that beyond, having finished his game, Valdor had overheard her request, and had noted the manner in which it was received.

"She has never seen White Ladies, and he will not have her there! It is strange!" thought the Parisian, struck by the circumstance, as he might never have been but that the fair face which he had beheld first among the lilies, had wakened a new and deepening interest in him. Lucille was so unlike all he had ever seen.

"Your ward is very lovely, Strathmore," he said that night, as they walked up and down the lawn under the limes smoking. "She reminds me of some one, I cannot for the life of me think whom. Can you help me?"

"Not at all. It is rather an uncommon style of beauty," answered Strathmore, indifferently, while swift to his own memory swept the recollection of that sunset hour when Valdor had watched the death-spasm convulse the face whose features she took, and the death film gather over the eyes from which her own had their smile.

"True. But I have seen some one like her," persisted Valdor. "Did I ever know her parents?"

"Very possibly. But both died so many years ago, that it is not likely, I fancy, that you would recall them."

The answer was negligently given, as in a matter of small moment, yet in no way as though he avoided the inquiry; for though his earlier regard for truth had not worn away, the profound and acute mind of the politician had dealt too long in finesses not to deem them legitimate under private or public necessity.

"De Vocqsal," repeated Valdor, musingly. "She was of Hungarian birth, I think you said? May one ask, without intruding, anything more?"

"Of course, my dear Valdor!" said Strathmore, surprisedly, with his slight, cold smile. "You speak as though Lucille were some enchanted princess! But there is little to learn. Her name you know; she lost her parents in her infancy; I and my mother are her guardians. What remains? She is still a child!"

"But a lovely one, pardieu!" laughed Valdor, thinking to himself that he had been a fool building up a mare's-nest. "Do you know that I have actually been bête enough to suspect you of a nearer tie to her. I fancied she might be your daughter."

Strathmore smiled:

"Mon cher! your imagination has run riot! That my mother's home is hers might have assured you of the legitimacy of her birth."

The Comte laughed gaily:

"Of course!—and *I* should be the last to wonder

at a generosity in you. But—one question more ! Why will you not let her go to White Ladies ? I could hardly help echoing her prayer myself."

" She may go, certainly, but she is almost too young to be brought out at present ; and White Ladies, whenever I am down, is as completely 'the world' as the London season ; seen there, she might as well be presented at once. However, she must very soon be both ; but the question of when, is more for my mother's adjustment than mine. I do not think it is for a young girl's happiness to begin womanhood, coquetry, heart-burnings, and late hours too soon ; but most likely women differ from me."

He spoke negligently, with easy indifference, as men speak of a trifle which, turn whatever way it may, will have no import to them, and Valdor dismissed his supposed secret as a chimera. But as they parted that night, Strathmore's eyes followed him with their dangerous and merciless light lit in them ; the mere interrogations had aroused his wrath, and aroused with it insecurity and suspicion. " He meant no more than he said. He is as transparent as glass !" he thought, with the disdain which a reserved and self-contained mind entertains for a frank and unreserved one. " It is impossible he can fancy the truth ; the likeness in her is not strong enough to suggest it ; even if it did it could never go *beyond* fancy. There would be nothing to support it, nothing to corroborate it. Yet—if I thought there were a fear, I would find some means to stop his babble."

The thought did not travel further, and did not

take definite shape or meaning ; it was only the vague shadowing of an impalpable dread, but it was coloured by that inexorable pitilessness which swept from his path all that obstructed it, the pitilessness which made at once the force of his career and the evil of his character. His yearning to work out expiation through the living to the dead was holy in its remorse ; such may well claim to wash away and to atone for the deadliest sin that can rest upon the soul of any man. But—this is the greatest evil which lies *in* evil,—the ashes of past guilt are too often the larvæ of fresh guilt, and ONE crime begets a brood, which, brought to birth, will strangle the life in which they were conceived.

That night, after her attendant had left her, Lucille, who felt wakeful, she knew not why, threw open one of the casements of her bed-chamber and leaned out, resting her cheek on her hand, and her eyes on the moonlit seas, lying wide and bright in the stillness of the summer night, with here and there, against the starry skies, the dark sail of a coasting vessel gliding slowly and silently. A child in years, she had the heart of a poet ; and that vast limitless ocean in serenity and storm, in the tempest of black midnights, and the calm of holy dawns, had been a living poem to her from her infancy ;—indeed the beautiful myths, and the idyllic dreams she drew from it, had much to do with deepening the susceptibility of a nature already too poetic and too ethereal for its own peace and its own welfare.

She leaned out, under the leaves and clematis-flowers, clustering about her window, while her hair, flung backward, fell unbound over her shoulders, and her deep wistful eyes travelled over the starlit Atlantic, whose ceaseless melody swelled upward from the beating surge, through the quiet of the night. As she rested there, two shadows passed before her sight; one crossing the sward under the limes below, another passing before the lighted casements of a chamber in a wing, built out, so that divided by a lawn, it stood opposite to her. The first was Lionel Caryll, smoking, and walking backwards and forwards there, with all a youth's romance, to watch the light which shone from her window, through the clematis-clusters, while he mused vaguely, timidly, of what he loved this fair child too reverently, to dare draw out from the golden haze of an immature dream which could not call itself a hope. The second was Strathmore, who, in this brief break upon his life of feverish power and unceasing conflict, could not wholly abandon the habits of his accustomed sphere, nor cease wholly to work the wheels within wheels of a keen ambition and a ruthless statecraft, but who, pacing to and fro his chamber, dictated to his secretary the verbal subtleties of a foreign correspondence. The two shadows crossed her sight; the moon-rays fell on young Caryll's face, lending it much of delicacy and sadness, as his steps sounded slowly one by one upon the stillness; and the strong waxlight within showed Strathmore's profile distinct, as though cut on an *intaglio*, as he

passed swiftly up and down before the open windows, the countenance full of haughty intellect and lofty power, like the face of the man, whose iron brain framed, and whose iron hand would have carved out the blood-system of "Thorough"—master of all men, save of himself !

On the two the innocent eyes of the young girl fell, as she looked into the night, and away across the starlit ocean ; and on the one they scarcely glanced, but on the other they lingered long. It was not on the youth as he paced under the windows, keeping fond yet holy watch on the light of her casement, and dreaming over thoughts hardly less guileless than her own, that Lucille looked, but on the worn and unrevealing face of the statesman, cold in its power, dark in its written record of spent passions, as he consumed the sleepless hours of the gentle night in the exercise of a restless and dominant ambition. She lingered there long, and wistfully, hidden in the shroud of fragrant clematis, and her eyes never wandered from that resting place ; then she gently closed the window, and over her face was a deep and loving tenderness, a hush of sweet unutterable joy that smiled on her lips and filled her eyes with unshed tears.

"How great he is—and how good !" she whispered softly to herself. And then she knelt down beside her bed, with her hands crossed on her heart, and her young face upraised, and, even as she had done from infancy, prayed to God for Strathmore.

## CHAPTER XX.

## ONE OF THE LEGION OF THE LOST.

IN a bed-chamber au deuxième, in a house in the Rue Beaujon, Champs Elysées, sat a woman, while in the street below rattled the wheels of passing carriages, and through the windows little was seen save leaden roofs, and dripping water-pipes, and dreary skies, for the day was wet and cheerless. The chamber was luxurious to a certain extent, if something too glittering and meretricious ; the hangings were of *rose tendre*; ormolu, buhl, rosewood, marqueterie, porcelaine de Sèvres, were not wanting; and cache-mires, sables, flowers, *objets d'art*, were scattered over it, the offerings of those young *lions* who were anxious to have their names associated with one who had been the most notorious and dazzling star of the demi monde years ago, and who, even yet, by a resistless spell of fascination, was as costly to them as the Baccarat, and the Lansquenet, and the Rouge et

Noir, which drew thousands of francs from their pockets in the midnight privacy of her salon. Out of the bed-chamber opened the drawing-room and the supper-room, both furnished in the same style ; with warm nuances of colour, which struck the eye pleasantly ; with carefully-shaded light, which cast its own twilight here upon everything ; with an ensemble which looked glowing and illusive when the apartments were lit, and scented with dreamy odours of pastilles, and redolent of the bouquets of rich wines and the smoke of chillum from eastern hookahs. On the dressing-table of the bed-chamber lay many jewels, chiefly inimitable counterfeits, for the originals of most had been parted with for two-thirds their value as soon as received, and paste was all which glittered there in company with the cases of rouge, cosmetiques, pearl-powders—all the dreary pitiful paraphernalia of the life which masks the youth it has lost, and dares not, or cannot, wear the dignity of coming age, but only hideously masks the tread of time, and wreathes a death's-head in an unreal smile ! And by the table sat a woman. It was but noon, and she was alone ; the pigments and powders of the toilette-table had not yet been used, and they were sorely needed. Needed—to lend their bloom to the hot, parched lips, their lie to the haggard and faded brow, their blush to the hollowed cheek, their lustre to the heavy eyes. Needed—for in this face there was such still splendid remnant of bygone loveliness as will linger in the discoloured petals of a flower

which has been trodden and trampled in the mud—such trace of a brilliant and matchless beauty too great for any age to utterly sear out, as only served to make the wreck more bitter—such straying rays still lingering of the gracious glory with which Nature had once dowered her peerless work, as only made the souls of young and virginal women, who passed her in the crowd, vaguely shudder at all which had been thus lost, thus sullied, thus debased. And this was Marion Vavasour!

Where had fled the dazzling radiance which had seemed of old to fill her face and form with light? Where had fled the haughty grace with which she had swept through the presence-chambers of Courts, bending monarchs to her will?—the superb triumph which had wantoned on her lips, and sat throned upon her brow?—the lovely youth which had beamed from her antelope eyes, and smiled in her sparkling wit?—the resistless sorcery with which she had bought the souls of men at her will, when the night-luminance streamed on the diamonds flashing in her glittering hair, or the gladness of the morning fell about her where she stood, wreathed in the fragrant clusters of her summer-roses? *Where?* Where all things fall!—into the grave of Time, which, ever full, yet ever yawns for more—into the abyss which waits for the Womanhood that is sullied, and sin-steeped, and gives its glorious dawn and noon to sowing broadcast seeds of evil whose deadly harvest ever ripens, and is reaped by its sower in the dark vale of waning years.

*Fucilis descensus Avernae.* Down—down—even as one slips down a shelving and glassy slope the Dis-crowned had fallen, slowly yet surely, for there are no resting-places on that road; once launched, there is no refuge, save in the chasm below. The fate to which an inexorable vengeance had doomed her had been hers, and would be hers until the uttermost letter of its pitiless Mosaic law had been fulfilled. Dethroned, disgraced, exposed, mocked, reviled, stripped of her power, and stricken into poverty and shame, there was but one fate for this wanton, merciless, beautiful, evil woman—the sorceress in angel guise, the destroyer veiled in lovely youth, the *demonia con angelico riso*.

Not for her the purging bitterness of shame, the purifying fires of remorse, the acrid yet holy tears of the Magdalen, whose heart whilst crime-riven is contrite. Not for her: she knew humiliation, but she knew nothing of repentance; she only knew revenge. She suffered: but not with the suffering which on the ashes of guilt raises the sanctuary of expiation. Perhaps, had mercy been yielded to her prayer in the hour of her extremity, had she been humbled to the earth with the god-like forgiveness which would have spared her, and bade her “go, and sin no more,” the faint rays of purer light which here and there strayed across her soul might have dawned clearer and stronger, and have saved her. Perhaps! Few are so deeply lost that an infinite mercy cannot do something to restore them. It had been denied her, and

Marion Vavasour from that hour gave herself up to dazzling evil, and steeped herself recklessly in that gilded degradation which ere then she had shrunk from, and drank to the lips of guilty pleasure, and used her beauty with fearful and pitiless power to curse her own soul and all others that she drew into the Circean tempting.

And therefore was she thus now, fifteen long years after. For the riches of sin flee swiftly, scattered in a mad extravagance; and as her beauty stole away before the step of time, so stole her power with it; so she sank downward in that decline whence there is no ascent; so she drifted swiftly and surely over the passage of years from brilliance and sovereignty and evil sway, towards that dark and lonely end which he who drove her forth to her fate ordained to her in words which needed no prophet's prescience to give them their prediction. And therefore she was thus now.

She sat alone, whilst over the stove the chocolate simmered, and without the ceaseless pouring of the rain dripped wearily. Where were her thoughts? Away in that glad omnipotent time when she had reigned wheresoever she moved, commanded wheresoever her brilliant glance fell; when the riches of empires and the mines of both hemispheres had been rifled to adorn that marvellous loveliness which kings adored; when she had listened to the nightingales among the fragrant aisles of her rose-gardens with that soft poetry which made her deadliest spell, her

most seductive veil; when she had seen princes bending to her feet, and royal women outshone by the glory of her face, while Europe babbled of her fame? Surely: they wandered far back over the past as she sat there, with no companion in her solitude, save the drip, drip, drip of the unceasing rain from the black leaden roofs without: wandered far, while in the columns of the *Patrie*, which she was wearily glancing through, her eyes rested on one name:

“STRATHMORE.”

And that name was associated with dignity, with honour, with a wide renown, with the great policies of Europe, with all which encircles the career of a dominant and successful statesman. What weakness was there in this patrician power, what crevice in this blade-proof mail, what flaw in this haughty and inaccessible life, through which the bolt of a woman's retaliation could speed its way to the quick?

None!—none!

It had baffled her hopelessly through all these years, which to her had been a gradual descent from empire into impoverishment, which to him had been a gradual ascent from ambition up to power. Yet she had held it in close sight persistently. For there is nothing at once so hopeless and so persistent as a vague, shapeless, impotent, yet undying, desire for Revenge. All these years she had had watch kept on him, and through them all she had failed to discover one aperture through which the adder of retaliation could worm its way and leave its venom. Yet

she had never given up hope ; she had never surrendered her search ; for I have said that in the nature of this woman there was much of the panther, its cowardice, its velvet softness, its cruelty, its wanton love of destruction ; and, like the panther, she lay in wait.

Her eyes rested now on the word “Strathmore ;” honour, dignity, power, sway, these were what she beheld ever paid to him, gathered by him, become alike the mistress and the ministers of the man who had once been the abject slave of her caress and her word. Their parts had changed ; he had hurled his tyrant down into the dust, and stood afar off—afar as though their lives had never touched—where her passionate hatred, her burning bitterness, could no more assail him, than the fever of fretting breakers the icy summits of mountains above them. And a hopeless sickness, a faint despair came over her, as her eyes gazed upon his name. Should she *never* reach him, should she *never* gather up from the wreck of the past, sufficient of the force, the power, the will of Marion Vavasour to smite that steel-clad life, that soul of bronze, even as he had smitten hers, to make him reel and stagger beneath her blow, even though to compass his destruction she herself *might* perish ?

With a passionate gesture she crushed the journal in her hand, and threw it from her ; her lips set, her eyes gleamed, her hands, so fair and delicate still, clenched with convulsive force, and in her teeth she muttered thirstily, dreamily :

"It must come, it *shall!* 'Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre !'"

And then she arose and went before her toilette-mirror, and, leaning her head upon her hands, sighed, whilst a hot, arid mist gathered in her eyes : far more cruel to her than death or shame, or privation, was the loss of her glad and glorious loveliness.

"Oh ! woman, woman, you miserable insect-thing !" she said, bitterly, while her old mocking smile came about her lips, but now derisive and now joyless. "Only born to pander to men's pleasure—only created to intoxicate their senses and to damn their souls—what are you worth—what are you worth ? A butterfly of less value than a dead leaf, when one short summer has stolen your beauty ! You reign by the brightness of the eyes, the bloom of the cheek, the whiteness of the bosom, and when those are gone you may lie in a kennel and die. What are your victories ? Only such as drink, or dice, or the Turf win as completely ! What are your slaves ? Only those who are the slaves not of you, but of their own passions ! Impotent, wretched, ephemeral thing !—only loved for the vice you gratify, only of worth while there is youth on your lips !"

The mocking, scorning words broke out with the pride and the eloquence of long-past years ; to her heart she felt their truth.

"And yet—and yet," she muttered, "it *is* power—while it lasts. To see them, as I have seen, thirst for a glance and hang on a smile, and love a sneer, a re-

buff, a cruelty rather than no word ! To make them, as I have made, kneel and pray, and grovel in the dust to kiss one's feet ; and bend their proud necks to the yoke, and break their stern souls down to a spaniel's humility ; and deal out anguish and despair, heaven and hell, at will. Ah ! it is Power ! None wider, none surer on earth, while it lasts ! ”

The words were passionate now and triumphant ; for the instant she lived again in the rich and royal Past, and tasted all its glories. Then her head sank, and the salt tears filled her eyes, and her hot pale lips quivered, and a piteous, wailing cry broke from her :

“ Oh, my lost beauty—my lost beauty ! ”

And then after a while she took up the rouge, and the powders, and the paint, and sought wearily and futilely to counterfeit all which had fled for ever ; and when she arose after that ghastly task, through all, despite all, there was something beautiful still ; the haughty grace, the antelope eyes, the sovereign glance, the perfect form, these naught could wholly destroy save death ; but it was only such fugitive, sullied, faintly-lingering beauty as made the history it told more bitter and heart-sickening ; as would linger about the golden cup which had been bruised, and polluted, and burned in the fire, as would remain to the glorious statue which had been defaced and overthrown in ruins in the dust, as would be given by the painter of the Purgatorio to the faces of the fallen and accursed as they bear their doom.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE.

THE summer morning broke warm and clear over the western coast, and Strathmore, as he rose and dressed, bade his servant set the windows open. The ocean sparkled in the light, the birds sang among the leaves, the golden gorse blossomed far and wide over the bluffs and moors ; but in his youth he had had little sight or heed for these things : he had none now ; the fairness of the opening day he barely noticed. But beneath his windows rose another song than that of the thrushes, as sweet as they and as joyous ; the song of a young heart and a young voice rising up to heaven with the early day, with the fragrance of the flowers, with the freshness of the dew, with the odour of the grasses, with all things fair and pure. It was the invocation of the Spirits to the Hours, from Shelley's "Prometheus :"

The pine-boughs are singing  
Old songs with new gladness,  
The billows and fountains  
Fresh music are playing,  
Like the notes of a spirit from land and from sea.

And the words, with the improvised music, uprose on the air as a lark rises into the clouds.

He heard it, and approached the window ; in the sunlight Lucille was bending down among the flowers like Milton's Proserpine,

Herself the fairest flower ;

filling her hands with their fragrant wealth, with golden laburnums, snow-white lilies, roses dew-laden, buds nestled in their dark wet leaves, and drooping coils of scarlet creepers. He stood and watched her where she moved in all the gladness of her youth and the brightness of the morning, among the boughs and blossoms, while the burden of her song echoed upon the air, and the sunny warmth of light fell on the fairness of her face. He watched her, and over the world-worn coldness of his face a strange softness trembled, and into his calm pitiless eyes came a yearning pain—he thought of the dead. He had loved him, he had been loved by him so well ! and across the dreary stretch of years no cry of a vain agony could reach, to pierce the tomb where he had been hurled in all his glad and gracious manhood. The life lay rotten to ashes in the grave : what avail the passionate throes of a remorse, impotent, tardy, powerless with God or man ? Remorse could not bring back the dead ! Yet remorse ate into his soul

as the brand burned into the brow of Cain ; with him by night and day, beside him in the glitter of courts, lying in wait for him in his solitude, consuming his peace under the purples of power, it burned ever in him ; this remorse, hidden under an armour of steel, veiled from men's sight beneath a powerful, successful, impenetrable career. And into his eyes now, there came a weary, passionate, yearning grief, as he gazed down upon the young life which had sprung from that of the lost, where she stood among the flowers with the joyous echo of her song floating softly down the air ; and his lips moved in an unconscious, broken prayer, as though that prayer could reach the grave.

“ My friend, my brother ! I will guard her without shade or soil, her life shall be before my own. Oh God ! may not *that* suffice ? ”

“ Lucille will soon be a child no longer.”

His mother spoke again the same words as she had spoken the night before, where she stood in the embrasure of one of the oriel windows, a woman aged, but of noble presence still, in carriage and in feature not unlike to Marie Antoinette, with her silvered hair turned back from a haughty brow, and the sweeping folds of her black robes draping a form bowed but full of dignity ; for Lady Castlemere had been the proudest woman of her day until the steel of her will had been bent and softened in the fires of calamity and the crucible of age. Strathmore stood opposite

to her, leaning against the casement; it was near sunset, and they were alone. He looked up from what he was reading:

"Unhappily, yes."

"And she has great loveliness, Cecil?"

"Very great; she has had from childhood."

"Then we must not always imprison it here? In a year or so at latest she should see some other world than that of a solitary sea-shore, some other society than that of her birds, and dogs, and flowers. Your wish, of course, decides all concerning her, but neither your duty nor mine would be fulfilled if we denied her for ever any other sphere than this."

Strathmore was silent some moments; he felt an invincible reluctance to realise the truth that Lucille was growing out of childhood; a yet greater to give the signal for the flight of all that made her as glad and as innocent as a child, by her introduction into a world where she would learn her own loveliness, be sullied by flattery, see hollowness, artifice, frivolity, all of which she never dreamt now, and be taught either joy from other hands than his own, or the pain from which he would have no power to shield her.

"Some time—yes," he answered, slowly; "though she will learn nothing by wider freedom save what is best unlearnt. She must be introduced, and presented, and all the rest, of course; but there is no haste for that. She is so young yet; and whilst she is happy here, she is better here."

His mother was silent too for a while. I have said

that Strathmore had at no time given her more than a chill regard and a courteous respect; he was not a man to be bound by or to feel any of these ties, but she loved him—loved him better since she had shuddered at his crime and aided his atonement. She was silent; then she moved towards him, and laid her hand lightly on his shoulder, a hand like his own—long, fair, delicate to the touch, yet never to be shaken from its grasp, the hand which seems instinctively formed to hold Power.

“Strathmore, forgive me if what I say pains you; you know how deeply I should grieve to do so; but as Lucille grows older, a question occurs to me which I never remembered during her infancy. All those who see her, believe her parentage foreign, and never dream of looking beyond the fact that she is an orphan, and a ward of yours and of mine. But—if men meet her who learn to love her, they may look closer, and to whosoever becomes her husband in the future you must tell the history of her true name and fate.”

Strathmore almost started, and a look of distaste and repugnance passed over his face: the young life which had been to him like a child-angel of atonement looked to him too sacred for the sensual thoughts of love to approach, or the touch of a lover’s kiss to profane.

“Love? Marriage? They are desecration to associate with that young innocent child,” he said, impatiently. “Let her love, as she does, the waves

and the birds and the flowers; they are the only things pure enough for her. *Our* brute passions have nothing in common with her."

"Still—unless she were consigned to conventional seclusion—it will be impossible to prevent the love of men from fastening on her by-and-by?"

"True: but it will be time enough to speak of that whenever her own heart is touched."

There was the look in his eyes which ever came there when his will was crossed; but Lady Castlemere's will was as resolute as his own. She pursued the subject:

"But in the event I name, to one to whom Lucille may be betrothed in the future, her parentage must be made known. Has this never struck you?"

"I see what you mean; but it shall never be so."

The reply was calm, but it was inflexible. In his heart he swore that none should ever learn that fatal secret, none ever glean the power to unfold to her that he whom she caressed and revered, and honoured and prayed for as the guardian and giver of her every joy, had been the destroyer of her father.

"But how can it be avoided?"

In his cold fathomless eyes she saw the evil look glitter darker and darker, which would have been restrained to none save herself, and he answered her chillily:

"With that I will deal whenever the time comes, Suffice it, I shall never permit any to learn a secret

which is buried for ever, as much by *his* will as by mine."

She mused a moment over his words :

"Then," she said, slowly, "then—Lucille must wed with some one who must love her too well to ask her descent; there are few who love thus, Strathmore."

He looked at her in impatience, in surprise, in curiosity :

"Why talk of love at all? To think of marriage for her looks to me as premature, as it seems pollution! In the seclusion in which you live here you select all her acquaintance, and she meets none who can whisper to her of what she does not herself dream."

"Perhaps not; but there is one here who may do so."

"*Here?*"

"Yes; my grandson loves her; he scarce knows it himself, they have been so long together, from her infancy; but I know it; and some hour or other, unpremeditated and involuntarily, he may discover his own secret and utter it to her."

"A boy's puling fancy! a lad's moonstruck sickness! Why have him here if he must taint the air she breathes with the miserable maundering of sentiment?"

He spoke with intolerant, contemptuous impatience, his slight, bitter smile upon his lips, chill and disdainful; it incensed him more than he showed, that this

youth should have dared to dream of love in association with Lucille, should have dared to desecrate with his amorous follies the opening life which seemed too pure for any coarser touch of earth.

"My home is Lionel's," answered Lady Castlemere, briefly and coldly, for her grandson was as dear to her as Lucille—in truth, more so. "What he feels for her would not merit the harsh and scornful words you give to it; his love is like much first love, timid, shrinking, delicate, most reverential. He would breathe no word in her ear he would not speak in my presence, and he holds her in most perfect tenderness. It is an affection which has grown with his growth; he is not conscious yet of its force; but a word, a moment, may reveal his own heart to him, and then—I cannot answer for his silence."

"Secure it then. Send him on the Continent, or to Egypt, till the Oxford Term. I forbid a boy's maudlin sentimentality to desecrate her ear."

"Nello's love is purer than most older men's!" said his mother, with a sigh. "And I do not see the necessity to banish it wholly until we know that she would not respond to it——"

"Respond to it!"

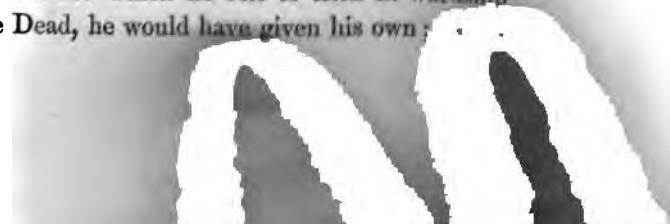
Strathmore echoed the words half in derision, half in incredulity, wholly with anger; around Lucille the only holy feeling which his nature had ever known had gathered so much that was hallowed, pure, and of profound sadness, that for any passion to approach her seemed like profanation, and for any other hand

to attempt to wrest her from his guardianship looked sacrilegious theft.

"Why should she not? Though a boy to you, he is not so to her. She feels for him a loving affection, born with infancy, which may well deepen into what would be the safest and happiest love which she can know. His character is known to me as no other's can be; it is one to which her peace might be securely trusted; and with him the impediment which would surely arise with any other man could not occur; he would never dream of inquiring more deeply into her history. There are many reasons that induce me to think Nello's love—if she can feel any for him—would be the calmest haven we could secure for her. I leave the matter in your hands, you are her guardian; but I know that her happiness and peace are too paramount with you for you not to weigh them well. Pardon me if I suggest, Cecil, that it would be well neither to fetter her until she is old enough to know her own heart, and has had larger experience, nor, on the other hand, to banish wholly either him from her, or hope from him, lest thus you should shipwreck what else would be a tranquil and shadowless love? These matters seem beneath you, but they are not so, since you have made that young child's peace your care."

"Nothing is beneath me which can bestow on her a moment's joy, or spare her a moment's pang."

The brief words were the truth; to screen or to gladden the life which he felt to hold in wardship from the Dead, he would have given his own;



this man's heart as there were "depths which sank to lowest hell," so there were also "heights which reached to highest heaven." He spoke no more, but stood silent, revolving many thoughts—thoughts which had but one centre and one goal: Lucille's future peace.

As he went to his own chamber, half an hour afterwards, he met her on the wide staircase; she was dressed for the evening, and about her hair was wreathed a chain of delicate shells of a rare kind and opal hue: they formed a graceful ornament, and he noticed them as he paused.

"Oh, they are Nello's shells!" she answered, laughing. "Are they not pretty? He brought them from the cliffs to-day, and risked his life to get them. He said so sadly that he could not give me costly pearls like yours, that I told Babette to string them on a Trichinopoly chain, and fasten back my hair with them. I knew he would be pleased."

The words struck him as they would not have done but for others he had lately heard. He looked down into her fair eyes, now glad and laughing, yet in whose depths a sadness ever lay, deep, yet undefinable:

"You love this boy, Lucille?"

"Oh, dearly!"

She spoke warmly, earnestly, for the companion of her childhood was, indeed, very dear to her; and of "love," in men's and women's sense, Lucille knew nothing, scarce its name, save as it was written to her

—vague, mysterious, solemn, glorious—in the pages of Dante and his brother poets. Strathmore passed his hand over her brow with a gentle caress, and went onward in deep thought. It was strange how this single holy feeling, which had grown out of his trust from Erroll, penetrated and intertwined a life which seemed, in all other respects, chill as ice, impenetrable as steel, and filled to the brim with insatiate ambition, worldly wisdom, and power which was not seldom as unscrupulously sought as it was imperiously wielded. It was singular how in the cold yet restless, successful yet insatiate, callous yet embittered, career of the Statesman, this solitary, pure, and chastened tenderness had been sown and rooted. Lucille was the sole living thing he loved, Lucille the sole living thing he would not have trampled down in his path unheeding; and a sickly sense of *loss* came over him as he thought that, however he had thus far fulfilled her father's trust, her future must pass into the care of others whom it would be beyond his power to control; that, with whatever gratitude, reverence, and love she now regarded him, the time must come when her guardian must surrender her to her husband, and the joy of her life be given from other hands, and other lips, than his.

“Caryll, I need a few words with you. Will you come hither?”

Strathmore stood outside one of the dining-room windows smoking on the lawn without, while his

secretary and his nephew lingered over the olives. Valdor was away on some legality connected with Torlynne. The young man rose and went to him instantly, where he stood in the moonlight; Strathmore held him at a distance, and Caryll feared, almost disliked him — all youths of his age did. The graceful negligence, the haughty courtesies, more cold in their suavity than their omission could ever have been, the subtle bitter sneer, the profound knowledge, felt rather than ever shown—all these awed and repulsed them, apart from the lofty and glittering fame which surrounded the successful and inscrutable Minister.

“Walk away from the windows, if you please,” said Strathmore, as he moved across the grass. At the bottom of the lawn he turned and glanced at his nephew. “So, Caryll, I hear you love my young ward—is it true?”

At the suddenness of the personal and merciless question, spoken, moreover, in that soft, harmonious voice of which every inflection could cut as coldly as an ice wind, Nello was speechless; he coloured to the temples, and his eyes dropped shyly as a girl’s; his love was sacred to him, and he dreaded his inquisitor. In the light of the moon Strathmore’s eyes studied him searchingly, and the politician, accustomed to read men’s thoughts at a glance, read the youth’s heart to its depths. He smiled, unconsciously, contemptuously: his nature was unsympathetic, and for the timidity and poetry of young love he had no compassion—he had

never known them himself—and here, as well as a foolery, they looked a profanity.

“Chi arrossisse è se tacea, parla assai,”

he said, with the derisive coldness which was as terrible as a knife-thrust to the ardent, sensitive, unveiled heart of the boy, who shrank under the glance and the tone, as a prisoner under the cold steel of the inquisitor: “And may I ask on what grounds you have upbuilt your romance, or what right you have to presume to build it at all?”

The hot blush died off young Caryll’s face, leaving it very pale: he had scarce known his love himself, until these abrupt and merciless questions threw their light upon it.

“Right?” he said, hesitatingly and hurriedly. “I have no right, sir—scarcely hope.”

“‘Scarcely!’ Then you cherish some?”

His eyes, with a chill disdain slumbering in their depths, fastened in relentless watch upon his nephew’s face, till the painful flush and pallor kept changing there like a woman’s. It was a terrible ordeal to Lionel Caryll to have his heart probed and bared by this negligent, callous, pitiless, polished man of the world!

“Who does not, sir, who loves?” he murmured, almost indistinctly.

“Then you think that Lucille gives you hope?”

The questions were put coldly, carelessly, but with

an authority which seemed to the youth to wrench answers from him whether he would or not.

"Yes—no—I cannot tell—I dare not say," he muttered, hurriedly. "She is very gentle to me, but that she is to all things; she loves me, I know, but it may be only as a brother. Still—still—with time, I fancy—and she wore my shells in her hair to-night—"

His cold smile played a moment about Strathmore's lips. To this man, whose soul had been drunk long ago with the madness of passion, and was now steeped in the intoxication of power, the shyness and the romance of a first love seemed puling puerile sentiment.

"You consider you *have* hope," he said, chillily. "Whether founded or unfounded, time will show. And now, how much of this 'love' have you presumed to whisper to my ward without my permission?"

"Not a syllable!" said the young man, eagerly. The interrogation roused his pride, and made him shake off the awe which he felt for the man who stood there, smoking in the moonlight, with his searching glance fixed on him, and his point-blank questions dealing, without sympathy or compassion, with what was to him the very core and goal of his life. "Not a syllable, I swear, Sir! I have never let her dream of any other feeling than that with which we played together in her infancy. I would not—I dare not—she is too sacred in my eyes.

To speak of love to her would seem profanation; to think of it, does almost!——”

He spoke hurriedly but earnestly, and with all the delicacy and tenderness which characterised a love that his own temperament, and Lucille's early years, had both tended to make rather reverential than impetuous, rather poetic than passionate, such as the young knights of Arthur's Code felt for some holy and lofty love, their guiding-star from afar off, but beyond the reach of grosser desire.

His answer found favour with Strathmore, and softened the haughty and scornful intolerance with which he had hitherto regarded the young man's attachment; he perceived at a glance that here there would be no maudlin romance, no sickly sentiment to brush the bloom off the fair opening leaves of Lucille's young heart. He was silent, and paced up and down for a few moments, musing on his nephew's reply; then he paused, and looked on the young frank face in the moonlight, while Caryll's eyes met his, fearlessly now, though a boyish flush was hot on his temples.

“ You are perfectly right,” he said, briefly. “ I am glad you have so much perception and so much reticence. To have taken advantage of your position and opportunites to usurp her ear, without having received my permission, I should have considered very unwarrantable, and should have resented proportionately. As it is, you consider that you have

some grounds for hope, and I am aware myself that Lucille holds you in sincere affection; whether it may ever ripen to more, neither you nor I can tell, and I distinctly forbid any attempt to force it prematurely to do so."

Young Caryll bent his head silently; he felt powerless against this serene, inflexible will, and he knew that Strathmore, as her guardian, had a right to speak as he would.

" You understand? Now listen further. For two years I forbid any attempt to speak of love to her, or to secure her own. I do not interdict to you such means as may warrantably foster her affection for you; to do so would be unjust, but you must neither rouse nor fetter her heart in any way. At the end of that time she will be old enough to make her own choice, and she will have seen a wider world than this; you can then say to her what you will. If it prove that the hope you now cherish is legitimate, and if she find that you are dearer than any one has, or could, become to her—if, in a word, her happiness depend on you—I will sanction your suit. Give me your word to keep the silence I exact?"

Nello hesitated a moment. Two years! It looked an eternity! But an influence was upon him he could not resist. He had feared Strathmore before, now he felt his power; he saw, moreover, that the words were gentle and were just, and he bowed his head and gave the pledge.

Strathmore paused a brief time, looking at him

keenly, and taking gauge of his character—a gauge which satisfied him that Lady Castlemere had been right in her estimate of her grandson.

“Very well,” he continued. “Meanwhile, I will assist your career, so that should you ultimately be united to Lucille, your position may be honourable for her. You leave Oriel in the spring? My mother’s wealth is so tied that she can give you little or nothing, and you must make your own way in life. But I will return you for a seat in the House, and I will allow you such an income as will give you your independence, and leave you unshackled. It will rest with yourself then to become worthy of Lucille, and such as I should trust with the care of her future.”

Young Caryll looked at him, bewildered, incredulous, distrusting his own senses. He had heard of Strathmore’s ascetic indifference to wealth, and the generosity with which he gave it to others, but for himself he had had scarcely passing notice from him, and he listened dreamily, marvelling whether his dread had been error, and if beneath the chill and satiric suavity of manner there lay compassion and warmth. Words broke from him, full of the gratitude he felt, eager, breathless, fervid, eloquent from their simple truth and depth, and tremulous both with surprise and emotion. To the sanguine and dauntless heart of youth what luminous glory streamed over all his future with Strathmore’s words! For youth knows and fears nothing of two barriers in Life’s path, which men call Death and Failure.

and the birds and the flowers; they are the only things pure enough for her. *Our* brute passions have nothing in common with her."

"Still—unless she were consigned to conventional seclusion—it will be impossible to prevent the love of men from fastening on her by-and-by?"

"True: but it will be time enough to speak of that whenever her own heart is touched."

There was the look in his eyes which ever came there when his will was crossed; but Lady Castlemere's will was as resolute as his own. She pursued the subject:

"But in the event I name, to one to whom Lucille may be betrothed in the future, her parentage must be made known. Has this never struck you?"

"I see what you mean; but it shall never be so."

The reply was calm, but it was inflexible. In his heart he swore that none should ever learn that fatal secret, none ever glean the power to unfold to her that he whom she caressed and revered, and honoured and prayed for as the guardian and giver of her every joy, had been the destroyer of her father.

"But how can it be avoided?"

In his cold fathomless eyes she saw the evil look glitter darker and darker, which would have been restrained to none save herself, and he answered her chillily:

"With that I will deal whenever the time comes, Suffice it, I shall never permit any to learn a secret

which is buried for ever, as much by *his* will as by mine."

She mused a moment over his words :

"Then," she said, slowly, "then—Lucille must wed with some one who must love her too well to ask her descent; there are few who love thus, Strathmore."

He looked at her in impatience, in surprise, in curiosity :

"Why talk of love at all? To think of marriage for her looks to me as premature, as it seems pollution! In the seclusion in which you live here you select all her acquaintance, and she meets none who can whisper to her of what she does not herself dream."

"Perhaps not; but there is one here who may do so."

"*Here?*"

"Yes; my grandson loves her; he scarce knows it himself, they have been so long together, from her infancy; but I know it; and some hour or other, unpremeditated and involuntarily, he may discover his own secret and utter it to her."

"A boy's puling fancy! a lad's moonstruck sickness! Why have him here if he must taint the air she breathes with the miserable maundering of sentiment?"

He spoke with intolerant, contemptuous impatience, his slight, bitter smile upon his lips, chill and disdainful; it incensed him more than he showed, that this

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He spoke with intolerant, contemptuous impatience, his slight, bitter smile upon his lips, chill and disdainful; it incensed him more than he showed, that this

dark and mournful beauty, and her voice was hushed in its earnestness.

“I was thinking of how great you are, and how good; and how you who sway men with your word, and empires with your will, yet have so much care, and thought, and love for me.”

“Good!” He echoed the word with the bitterness of anguish; he had trained himself to bear all these things from her lips, and had sedulously fostered the reverence and gratitude she felt for him, but none the less did they cut him to the soul; and now and then, even his will of steel and his long-worn visor could not conceal the spasm of a struck wound, of a wakened conscience. His voice had a thrill of mingled pain and tenderness in it now as he stooped towards her:

“Never give that word to anything which I do, Lucille, least of all to what I do for you. You know that you are dear to me for—your father’s sake.”

“I know; but I cannot love you less, but more, because you loved him so well,” she said, softly, while her hand nestled into his, and drew it caressingly closer to her. At the clinging touch and the gentle words, the brand of crime, seared on the soul of the murderer quivered, as the brand of fire quivers in the living flesh of the doomed.

Yet he sat there, calm still, letting his hand lie in hers, and his lips wear the words with which he ever spoke of the dead; for his strength was great to endure.

"True, I loved him well," he said, gently; "and so would you have done; Lucille, you do not forget him; you think of him fondly, sometimes, as though you had known him—as though he were living now?"

"Ah, yes," she murmured, softly. "I think of you both, think of you together; you have told me of him until I know him so well, and when I kneel down I often pray to God to let me see his face, and hear his voice, in my dreams, as well as yours. And He does."

Strathmore sat silent; his hand lying in hers, his heart smitten by those innocent and childlike words, as by the stroke of the avenging angel.

"Your dreams are more merciful to you than the life which robbed you of him," he said, calmly and gently, for he suffered without allowing one sign to escape, or one blow to be spared him. "Love your father's name better than mine, Lucille. He is more worthy it than I."

"Lucille could not love anything *better* than you," she said, musingly, while her earnest, wistful eyes fondly studied his face with that regard which he had noticed as too mournful and too deeply contemplative for her years, when, as a little child, she had asked why he suffered, on the sea-shore. "Where was it that he died, Lord Cecil, and how? You have never told me that."

"He died abroad."

"And were you with him?"

“ Yes.”

“ Did he suffer ?”

A slight quiver shook his voice :

“ I hope to God, no.”

“ He died happily, then ?”

“ He died at peace with all, even with those who injured him. Not happy, since—since he left your mother scarce older than you are now.”

Lucille sighed, a hushed, broken sigh.

“ No—and his death was hers. I think *I* should die of a great grief, as my tame curlew did when his sister-bird was killed by the eagle. He could not live; why should he? There was no joy in the air, or the sea, or the sky, when what he loved was taken.”

She was silent, her hand clinging caressingly to Strathmore’s, as her eyes grew wistful with thoughts too poetic and too deep for her years. He rose involuntarily :

“ Hush, Lucille! No grief shall ever touch you! Why think of what cannot, what *shall* not, come nigh you? Are those letters? Is the evening mail come?”

“ Oh yes; those are yours. But come and sit by me to read them. Do !”

He obeyed her: inflexible as bronze to any other, a wish of Lucille was sacred to him. As her guardian, he had commanded that her desire should never be disputed nor disappointed, and to himself, when with her, he allowed it to be law. A nature less pure, less

loving, less incapable of being warped to egotism or tyranny than hers, might have been ruined by this limitless indulgence; with Lucille it had no effect, save that of rendering her affections more clinging and deeply rooted, and her character more tender and dependent; the very luxuriance of its beauty was fostered by the warmth it basked in, if it were more certain to be blighted at the first sweep of frost or storm. She lay still watching him, while he sat beside her breaking the seals of his correspondence. His face wore no evil traits to her; she only saw its power, its intellect, its profound melancholy; she only saw that the eyes so cold, the lips so mocking to others, for her ever wore gentle smiles and generous words. "Je n'en puis rien faire—ces traits ont toutes les plus grandes qualités et tous les plus grands vices," a French sculptor had once said, casting down his calliope and chisel before a bust of Strathmore. But Lucille only saw the nobler, and saw none of the darker meaning, and she lay looking at him lovingly, reverently, silently: she was never more truly happy than thus. And as he sat thus, beside her couch, Valdor, who had that moment returned and entered the drawing-room, looked at them unperceived, and wondered afresh, as he had done before, what secret this could be which united Strathmore to this young girl, and which made a man ordinarily negligent in manner, indifferent to all human affections, and solely devoted to ambition and power, be tender towards her as a woman, submit to all her gentle caprices,

forestal her lightest wish, and watch with pleasure for her slightest smile. It was a mystery which he could not fathom. Strathmore, glancing upward, read his thoughts. Valdor looked keenly at him, to note if he resented having thus been seen; he might as well have sought to note the marble features of the Parian bust near him move and speak!

Strathmore was never betrayed into an unspoken expression of what he felt; he was calmly and impassively impenetrable. He did not move now, but smiled a courteous welcome to his friend, and spoke of some political news which the day mail had brought.

But he remembered the look with which the frank Henri Cinquiste had gazed at himself and Lucille, and the words he had spoken the night before, of surprise at her having never visited White Ladies; and he acted on both.

"Lucille, White Ladies will be full next month," he said, with a slight smile, the next morning, looking up from his letters where they sat at breakfast, the sunlight flickering through the screen of foliage and roses which overhung the Elizabethan windows.

She looked up eagerly, a flush on her cheeks, and her lips parted.

"Would you like to be with us?"

He spoke still with a slight smile, as of a man listlessly amused with the bright caprices and easily-bestowed pleasures of a child.

"Oh, Lord Cecil!—"

She did not say more; Valdor and his own secretary were strangers to her, and indulgence had never made her exacting.

"Very well, then. Plead with my mother, if she have no objection, to do me the honour to come there, and bring you with her."

"What a fool I was to suppose he did not wish her to visit White Ladies! My brain must be going, to dream such nonsense. That lovely child bewitches me!" thought Valdor, as he listened.

Two days afterwards, Strathmore left for the Continent. These brief visits were all he, a Foreign Minister, spared to Silver-rest; he was seldom fatigued —never alone; he was absorbed in the keen contest for power, and lived, with scarce a week's retirement, in the fulness of the world.

Valdor remained; all that he needed to see or do at Torlynne could have been seen and done in a week's time, but he stretched it over almost to the time at which Strathmore would be at White Ladies, and he should go thither with the rest of the autumn guests. The French noble had no pastoral tastes; "*Hors de Paris, hors du monde,*" was most essentially his creed; the sounding of the seas and the soft wild beauty of the western coast had no music and no charm for him; a *viveur*, a state-conspirator, a man of fashion, he was customarily wearied and impatient at a day's detention in any other world than his own. Yet he stayed on, in, or near the solitudes of Silver-rest.

He was captivated by the child-beauty, the spiritual, unconscious loveliness, which he had first seen among the lilies of the valley, flowers whose grace and fragility were like her own. He was at once enchain'd and held in check by it; to Lucille he could not speak of love, or even of compliment, as he would have done to others, they seemed profanation; yet he began to feel for her a far holier and more enduring tenderness than he, a wit and a voluptuary, had before known. She was silent with him; except with those whom she knew well, she had something of the soft shyness of the half-tamed fawn, and her nature was one of those, poetic, introspective, deeply thoughtful, and meditative far beyond their years, which speak but to few, and only find utterance when moved by the voice that they respond to, as the *Æolian* chords only echo to the touch of certain winds. But it was this which was newest to him; it gave him much to conquer, and he saw that whoever would win her heart must never startle it rudely from its innocent rest, but wind his way gently and slowly. He felt as both Strathmore, a cold and negligent Statesman, and Caryll, a romantic and unworn youth, had equally done, that "love" was no word to whisper to Lucille, and that, grasped too quickly or too boldly, the sensitive plant would surely close and recoil.

But Valdor had never failed, and his nature was sanguine; therefore he stayed on near Silver-rest, and learned a purer passion than he had ever known, while he listened to the young girl's voice, that was

low and sweet as the lulling of the seas ; or watched her, himself unseen, where she sat gazing on the changing face of the waters, with the deep shadow of ivy-hung rocks above, and sunlit sands stretching before her ; or heard her songs rising in mellow evening air, with some sad, wild German legend or rich cathedral chant for their burden ; or won her to speak to him of the things in which her eyes and her heart—those at once of a poet and a child, an artist and a dreamer—found beauty and delight : the silvery flash of a seagull's wing, a bird resting on a heather spray, a crested wave leaping in the light, a trailing coil of forest-leaves.

Strathmore had made provision for the early, guileless, hesitating love of the boy Nello ; he had made none — could have made none — against the more subtle, more eloquent, and more tutored tenderness of the man who had been beside him when he had slain her father, while in the west the sun had set, in the dead years long gone.

## CHAPTER XXII.

“SEIZED, IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR.”

IT was past midnight, in the salon *au deuxième*, in the Rue Beaujon.

The lights were many, and in their dazzle the warm nuances, the rose-tendre hues, the ormolu, the mirrors, the smoking-couches, made an enticing *fourberia della scena* in its own florid, demi-monde style. The air was heavy with the odours of wine from the supper-room, whose folding-doors stood open, and with the perfume of that chillum which was a speciality of the Rue Beaujon, and which some who smoked it averred to be delirious as Monte Christo's hatchis. Two or three tables stood about the room, and round each were grouped some half-dozen men, young attachés, soldiers, bankers, Englishmen, or nouveaux riches, few if any of them over thirty, some wanting ten years of it, and all flush of money, or they would have found no entrance there. At one table they were play-

ing Trente-et-Un, at the other Trente-et-Quarante, at a higher maximum than is permitted at Baden, *gros jeu*, where the colours revolved and the gold heaps changed, swift as thought in a dizzy whirl, and swifter than the thought of many could follow them. For the gaming which is forbade publicly will, like every other dangerous instinct, be indulged in secrecy ; and the play in the Rue Beaujon was greedily sought after suppers that left the pulse heated with fiery wines, and the reason little able to baffle the intricacies of hazard. It had made many a career beggared and ruined, ending in the Faubourg d'Enfer with crossing-sweeper's rags, where it had begun in the Boulevard des Capucines with a thousand-franc breakfast ; and it caused not a few lives to cease by a pistol-shot in the Bois de Vincennes, or an overdose of morphine in the grey early dawn.

The play was at its highest, the stakes enormous, the gold on the tables flashed and glittered under the light which was thrown back from the rose hangings and the gilded walls ; the heavy odours of the wines filled the air with an intoxicating aroma, and the wreaths of smoke still curled in spirituous vapour, though the hookahs had been left, while now and then the hazard went on in a dead silence, only broken by the formula of the cards ; and oftener was played in a mad whirl, a reckless rotation, in the noise of wild jests and riotous laughter and unbridled licence of words from brains half drunk.

And she who was the evil Circe of this evil Avernus,

with a glance would turn attention from the cards, till—too late—the stake was lost ; or with a smile would daze and dazzle some novice till his gold poured in showers into the bank ; or with some gay mot, which still rang with something of the old moquer, bewitching wit, would raise a laugh at the right moment, till her confederate—who played croupier for the nonce—raked in by rouleaux the money of the tyro. “Men who tempt, and women who are tempted !” So runs the old hackneyed, mandlin, threadbare dictum, much akin to the time-worn optimism which runs, “the Pagans who persecuted, and the Christians who were martyred ;”—as if there were not six of the one and six of the other ! Pshaw ! leave formularies aside, good world, and open your eyes. Women, from Eve downwards, have been First Tempters, and the tempters among them make up half the ranks of their sex, subtle wooers and destroyers of their hundreds.

In the light, with the bloom of art upon her face and the lustre of art lent to her eyes, with mock diamonds glittering where once the costly sapphires of a peeress had lain, with the enamel covering the deep haggard lines, and a smile haunting the lips with the mocking shadow of its old resistless witchery, there was some loveliness still : though ghastly—with out its youth ; though wrecked most piteously—to those who had known her in the years of her glory ; though fearful in the story which it told—to those who paused to read it. There was loveliness still,

though a wretched travesty of that which once had been ; though justly and truly looking on it she had cried out in her bitterness, "O, my lost beauty ! my lost beauty !" since none who remembered what Marion Vavasour once had been, and despised the wreck, remembered and despised as utterly as she. For this woman, who was without remorse for her work or conscience for her crimes, had a ceaseless misery for the social degradation which denied her Pride, and for the encroaching years which left her without Power, since these had been her gods, omnipotent and beloved, and were now drifted from her reach for ever, never again to be recovered.

The Mistress of Paris, who had beheld Greece rise in arms at the havoc of her loveliness, flung to the ribald, brutal crowds of the common soldiery, would not more bitterly have felt her degradation than did this woman. For, though sensual, merciless, frail, and fatal as She who, in the verse of *Æschylus*, comes with Death and Havoc following on her loveliness, she had loved to reign with imperious will, she had loved to veil her infidelities in poetic grace, she had loved to have her foot on the bent neck of a prostrate world ; and now—now—she sickened at herself ; not for her guilt, but for her humiliation ; not for the deep stain upon her soul, but for her broken sceptre, her jeered crown, her rent and trampled purples.

Is it not this, and no better than this, which now and again passes for Remorse ? yet which is no more

Remorse than its twin-brother, trembling Fear, is true Repentance.

Remorse Marion Vavasour never knew, and never could know ; but anguish for her own lost omnipotence she did. She knew it now ; to-night, while the noisy laughs echoed about her, and the reeking fumes filled the air of her salon. Oh ! bitterness of bitterness ! she, into whose presence sovereigns had humbly sued to come, could not resent the coarsest word that was uttered in her presence ; she, at whose feet princes had vainly knelt, while statesmen paled before the beauty of her smile, must tempt, and court, and seek these unfledged youths, these nameless idlers ; their witless profanities fouled the ear which had once listened to the graceful wit and delicate flattery of monarchs, their slighting glance contemptuously leered upon the face whose beauty once had been the theme of courts, the hymned of prince and poet, the torch which lit whatever it passed, to love, and feud, and madness. She who had ruled the rulers of the earth, could now be slighted by the lowliest !—deadlier than sackcloth and ashes, than hempen cord and sheet of penitence, were the rouge upon her cheek, the laughter upon her lips, the mock gem upon her breast, to this woman whose fastidious pride, whose victorious sway, whose aristocratic grace, whose capricious imperious will had been as haughty and dear to her as those of any anointed queen.

It was long past midnight ; the play was fast and

furious ; the stakes of frightful enormity ; the gamesters now and then drank down fiery draughts of fierce Roussillon, or above-proof cognac, or poisonous absinthe, and went, madder than before, to the wild whirl ; the light flashed back from the rose hangings and gilded ornaments on to the faces of the cards and the heaps of gold ; and now the game went on in a riotous chorus of jest and laughter, and now in the dead silence of high-strung excitement, while here and there fell a muttered oath, or twitching lips turned pale, as a million of francs was swept away on the turn of a colour or the hazard of a card.

Suddenly on the panels of the door, came a loud summons as at the gates of a barricade, thundering, impatient :—many of the gamblers, their brains besotted and their reason whirling with the delirium of play, scarce heard and did not note it, but he who played as croupier grew pale, and with a rapid sign began to sweep away the piles of Naps, while the Priestess of the Pandemonium, who ere this had slaughtered human lives with her skilled lie, and sent a murderer out to work her vengeance with cruel, unfaltering falsehood, stood in the gaslight with the unreal smile arrested upon her lips, and her cheek quivering slightly under its rouge.

She knew that the Rouge-et-Noir of the Rue Beaujon was discovered beyond concealment at last.

"Au nom de la Loi !"

Sharp and swift upon the summons for admittance, the door was burst open by instruments which

wrenched and splintered all the intricate locks and bolts for those little scrupulous of ceremony or tolerant of delay; the gaudy rose portière was thrust aside by rough hands, which dashed down all the barricades erected behind it; the salon and its privacy were invaded, the police filled the chambers.

“*De la part de l’Empereur!*” said a voice, serene, inflexible, as bland as though it gave a welcome salutation, as frigid as though it pronounced a sentence of death. Confusion, riot, tumult, execration arose pêle-mêle; the stakes were seized, the doors were closed so that no egress was possible; the tables were overturned, the croupiers dashed wildly here and there, trying to get to covert like a fox run close by the pack; some of the gamblers, their brains dizzy with the chillum and the wine, stared stupidly and helplessly at the seizure; others, cursing and blaspheming, sprang at the gold and cards, swore they were but playing at Boc with three francs as their maximum, and offered bribes, at any rates, with insane eagerness to have the thing kept dark. And while his subordinates secured the croupiers and the stakes, and other officials quietly took down the names and addresses of all present, the Inspecteur approached the mistress of the salon, and, with the same tranquil and inflexible courtesy, arrested her in the name of the Emperor.

For the moment, losing her self-possession, her presence of mind, her swift invention, and her ready diplomacy, the hideous contrast of her present and

her past smote on her through the darkness of evil years and the callousness of a soul unsexed ; she writhed from under the official's touch as from beneath that of an adder, and gazed at him with the wild stare of a hunted animal hard pressed, and, wringing her white and delicate hands, laughed a shrill, terrible, mocking laugh :

"The Emperor—the Emperor ! 'In the name of the Emperor !' What ! are the years come back when I was his guest and he mine ? Does he remember how often he sat at my table, that he summons me now to his Court ? To the Tuileries ! To the Tuileries ! Of course ! these diamonds are fit for the Tuileries !"

Rending the false jewels from her bosom and her hair, she cast them on the floor and trod upon them with her foot, those miserable symbols and insignia of her fall, crushing them to powdered glass, and laughing all the while, with bitter delirious mockery of herself.

In that brief instant of passionate misery, of ghastly irony, something of her old resistless grace, of her old imperious pride, returned as she wrested herself back from the official's grasp, and stamped into shining dust the worthless gems, while above the uproar round the gaming-table, above the clash of the gold as the police swept the stakes away, above the oaths of the startled, half-drunk gamesters, rang that laugh, once silvery as music, now jarred and dissonant :

“To the Tuileries! Of course!—To the Tuileries!  
My diamonds are fit for a Court!”

The Inspecteur, smiling slightly, took no note or heed of this delirious despair, and seemed neither to have seen nor heard it, but, proceeding without pause or hesitation with his errand, arrested her. For what she said had not even a meaning to him; he had heard of her but under her last alias and *nom de guerre*; he knew her but as a prisoner who had transgressed the law, and Marion Vavasour had no power now—not even to make the world, which is swift to forget, remember her past.

And this is the last step into the abyss of oblivion, when none even pause to recal *what we were*.

As a voiture dormise bore her, in close escort, from the doors of the house in the Rue Beaujon, apprehended on the proven charge of having a private gambling-hell every night in her salon, the vehicle was stopped in its progress a little farther down the street by carriages which blocked the way. The blind of the window nearest her was but half drawn, and she, who had now recovered her composure, her finesse, and her dissimulation, leaned forward as though to show how little moved she was by the charge against her by watching the night with idle amusement. The carriages which entangled the dormise stood before the residence of a French Prince, not enclosed by a court-yard, the doors standing wide open, as the guests dispersed after a State entertainment of more

than ordinary magnificence. Descending the broad flight of steps, which was lined on either side by lacqueys, and lighted to the brightness of noon, came the English Minister for whom the equipage waited, the gas shining on the riband which crossed his breast and the orders and stars which glittered there, and falling on his face—a face of pride, of dominance, of successful and imperious power.

Marion Vavasour, looking on him thus, shivered with the thirst of an impotent vengeance, and drooped her head upon her hands with a bitter moan of chained and baffled hatred.

He lived in riches, in dignity, in honour, with his name on the lips of the world, and the cup of his ambition filled to the brim and crowned ; while she !—

"Oh, Heaven !" she whispered, passionately, through her clenched teeth, "will the hour *never* come when I can strike him in his power and his arrogance ? Will the day *never* dawn when I shall say back in his ear, 'Such mercy as you gave, I give to you !'"

And in the warm summer night in the Paris street they passed each other thus as the carriages rolled on : the Minister who went from a State-gathering, and the Arrested who was taken to Judgment.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

" ROSES MY SECRET KEEP."

WHITE LADIES was filled.

In the great court-yard, troops of saddle-horses, or carriages with their postilions and outriders splashed and tired, came home in the grey twilight while the dressing-bell rang; in the King's Hall covers were laid for half a hundred guests; in the preserves a thousand head of game were bagged each day, yet no ground beaten twice; in the stately galleries trailed the sweeping dresses of peeresses; and under the roof of the Abbey were gathered not a few of those whose playthings are the policies and destinies of nations. For the master of White Ladies was in Office; and, while the dictum of the world never swerved him from his own course, he was a man who knew, to the utmost of its value, the worth of being prominent in the sight of the world if you seek to lead it.

Rome went to Cincinnatus in his farmstead soli-

tude; but modern Europe would never seek a Sulla once retired to his Cuman villa. Strathmore knew this; none better; and while he smiled at the follies of mankind, turned them to his own profit, and surrounded himself with luxury and circumstance because he recognised in them the most intelligible symbols of rule and power to the purblind sight of the masses, though he held both in disdain, and in his own tastes was almost ascetic, in his own life almost austere.

The gatherings at White Ladies were noted through the country; and Strathmore was as courtly a host as in his earlier years: his genius was one of those which, essentially facile, are never laborious. The amount of work done by him was vast, but it was done without effort; though he never wholly laid aside the political harness, none saw a gleam of it through the silken surcoat he wore in society; and whilst the chief secret of his power over men lay in the entire absence of sensitive self-consciousness, or Utopian ideology from his career, not a little attraction lay for them in the brilliant ease with which this ambitious and arduous career was covered by the same art with which the Damascus armourers covered their keenest steel with the light elegance of the chasing;—while the chasing blinded the eyes before which it flashed, the cunning smiths knew that the steel cut swifter passage home.

The warm sun fell across the sward through the boughs of the wych-elms, and down the ruined

cloisters into the oriel room where he sat at breakfast. The purple hangings were behind him, with the dead gold of their broidered chiffre; the light fell through the painted panes and the blazoned motto, "*Slay! and spare not;*" without, the same lengthened shadows fell across the sward, and the same ivy roots clung about the cloisters; even his own features were unaltered, the same save for some trace of added age, some look of haughtier power and of deeper melancholy, as on the day when he whom he had loved and slain had sat at his table, and the name of their temptress and destroyer been first upon his lips. Yet of that day he did not even think once out of the thousand times that found him sitting thus: wear the spiked band of penance long about your loins, and they shall so learn to bear it, that they feel it seldom, save when a sudden blow drives the iron afresh into the flesh. Could the Furies have pursued Orestes through many years, he would have grown used to the haunting troop, and would have learned to sleep, to rest, to labour, and to love in the loathed presence of the Avengers; and only at rare intervals would he have started from his slumber to shudder at the accursed forms, or flee in the dead of night from the sacred temple, because they hunted him from rest, and pursued him for the blood of Clytemnestra.

Strathmore's life was a successful one; not a contented one, because his insatiate and restless ambition always desired wider and more irresponsible domi-

nance than in this country the highest can ever wield, and because all happiness had been stricken from it with the betrayal of the woman he had worshipped, of the lips for whose kiss he had stained his soul with guilt. But one of those lives which, full, grand, eminent, make “happiness” look tame, insipid, and needless: and in such a life it was but the solitary hours when silence and sleep were nigh, or the rare days when the eyes of Lucille met his own, which remorse could claim; for the rest Strathmore was the world's, and the world his.

There was a brilliant party gathered about him at breakfast: English statesmen, German princes, French nobility, with lovely women, who sometimes discussed the question over their Orange Pekoe before the dressing-bell rang, whether he would ever marry. Negligent of their charms, and wedded to public life, brilliant eyes softly wooed him, never to awake response: the burning passion which had once consumed his life seemed to have seared out every trace of warmer desires. After that mad, guilty, but devoted love, none could assail him; the sternest ascetic who had ever dwelt in that Dominican monastery was not colder to women than he who, beneath its roof, had been the lover of Marion Vavasour.

With a large party he went out that morning deer-stalking for the day in the forests which belted in White Ladies, where red deer were as abundant as in the wilds of Exmoor. The sun had sunk, and the windows of the grey and stately façade were all lit, as they

returned and dispersed to their several chambers ; while Strathmore went to his own room, fronting the State Apartments, which had been unused from the time when they had harboured the loveliness which had tempted and forsaken him. Of her he now thought, as he left his chamber and returned along the corridor ; one of the long line of windows stood open to the night, and from the gardens below was up-wafted the heavy, rich scent of the roses ; and the remembered perfume suddenly rising, made the memory which lay within, coiled to stillness, but never dead,

like a dreaming snake,  
Drowsily lift itself fold by fold,  
And gnaw and gnaw hungrily, half awake.

It had been the love of his manhood, that single burning passion of an ambitious life ; and—though changed in one swift hour to deadliest hate, which had pursued her with unquenched and insatiate vengeance, which would have watched her still, with unrelenting gaze, starve as a beggar at his feet, and die of a beggar's dole denied—when memory uprose, and with it burned again upon his own the lips which had betrayed him, and with it he beheld again the loveliness for which he had rent down and trampled under foot the laws of God and man, the old agony uncoiled from its rest, and pierced him with its poisoned fangs.

He had loved her, till ambition, honour, conscience, life itself, had all been given to her hands ; he had

loved her with delirious, ungrudging worship, that saw in her kiss his heaven, in her smile his world, in her will his deity ; and that dead passion awoke, not less in hate but more, while yet across the stretch of many years it was stricken afresh with the stroke of its betrayal, and sickened afresh over all its wealth wasted, its treasure mocked, its idolatrous love poured out—in vain ! in vain !—upon that lovely, hideous, beautiful wanton thing, upon a courtezan, and an assassinatress. And it was thus it awoke now, stirred to memory by the odour of the roses that stole upwards on the mist through the opened window, as he passed down the solitary corridor ; and he flung the casement to, with swift hand and passionate gesture, to shut out that haunting, mocking fragrance of the flowers that Marion Vavasour had loved.

He—the cold, inflexible, and successful Statesman—shuddered and shrank from the mere scent of the summer-roses !

A low, ringing laugh, echoing gaily on the air, startled the silence of the corridor : it came from the unused State Chambers. He started as he stood by the casement, and looked up. The long passage leading thither was dully lit, for the gas burned low, and at its foot the opposite door of the State rooms stood open, and—with a light held high above her head, so that while the arched doorway and the chamber behind were deep in gloom, its luminance fell upon her and about her, brightly shed upon her young and

solemn, time-worn grandeur. Take me all over it—now, will you—now?"

The earnestness, too deep and thoughtful for her years, with which she had spoken of her trust and love for her guardian had passed away; now she was only a child, used to the gratification of every bright caprice and momentary fancy as she looked up at him with longing in her eyes and eagerness upon her lips.

He smiled :

"Not now, Lucille; we dine at nine, and it wants only a quarter; to-morrow I will take you wherever you wish. But how do you come here—and alone? The rooms where you were are never used. They have not given you those chambers, surely?"

He spoke with impatient anxiety: he could not have had her rest *there!*

She laughed amusedly :

"I lost my way! When I was dressed, I sent Babette to ask Lady Castlemere some question for me, but she was so long gone that I grew tired, and thought I would go myself. But I could not find the room so well as I fancied; I missed it among all these passages, and found myself wandering in those chambers. Why are they never used?"

Strathmore avoided answer.

"You must not wander alone about White Ladies till you know its intricacies, my dear. You may very easily lose yourself. I will take you to my mother now—they ought to have placed you close to her—

and then we must go down to the drawing-rooms.  
There are plenty of people very desirous to see you.”

Lucille sighed a little :

“Ah! I do not care much for strangers,” she  
answered him, as she ran up the steps, where she had  
hastily set down her little silver lamp.

The spaniel which he had given her in her infancy,  
and with which she never parted, though it was now  
very old, had remained in the chamber, and she went  
back to fetch him. The dog did not come imme-  
diately to her call, and Strathmore, following her,  
stood once more in the State Apartments, where his  
step had never entered, and his eyes never rested,  
through the many years which had passed since he  
had first returned to White Ladies.

“What beautiful rooms! Why are they never  
used? Because they are only for the Royal Family,  
is it? Who slept here last, then?”

She spoke, holding the lamp high above her head,  
so that its light was shed on her, and flickered fit-  
fully on the azure hangings, the Venetian mirrors,  
the gold services, the silk, and lace, and velvet, the  
costly cabinets near, and the dark shadow afar off,  
where the silvery rays could not reach, but left half  
the magnificence of the room lost in the darkness of  
the night.

At her innocent question he shuddered as at the  
scent of the summer-roses! His eyes glanced for one  
moment over the luxurious chamber, with its costly

adornments and its depths of gloom, in sickening memory—then they fell upon the form of Lucille, where she stood in the halo of the light, one hand holding to her heart the little dog which had once kept its faithful vigil crouched in the bosom of the dead. The hideous past seemed to breathe through the chamber with its pestilential odour, its avenged passions, its eternal guilt—and he stretched his hand, and drew her with a sudden gesture out from that unholy place.

Yet his voice was tranquil and his smile calm as he closed the door on her, and led her forward:

“Those State rooms are damp, they have been unused so long; it is not wise for you to be in them at night, Lucille. Besides, every one will think that I have deserted my guests.”

And, with the suave and graceful dignity of a courtier, he conducted her along the silent corridor, and down the broad oak staircase, in the full gleam of light, giving her urbane and courtly welcome beneath the roof of White Ladies, where her father’s laugh had so often rung in clear and joyous music, and her father’s hand closed in love and friendship on the hand which now held hers—the hand which, unfaltering, had dealt him death.

Lucille, introduced into the splendid circle gathered under her guardian’s roof, struck and touched all there with that ethereal and rare loveliness, of which its own unconsciousness made not the least and most

common charm. She was still but a beautiful child, with all a child's unstudied grace, a child's artless transparency; and the manner in which she had been reared, while it had given her that nameless ease which only belongs to high-breeding, had brushed nothing from the innocence of a youth which had loved the birds as its friends and the flowers as its teachers. Her young beauty charmed those who approached her like music, the upward gaze of her eyes, always earnest even to sadness, had for all the haunting sweetness of some remembered melody, and the joyous gladness of a life, on which no shade of sorrow had ever fallen, contrasted touchingly with the mournfulness which in moments of silence stole over her face, born of a nature musing, sensitive, and essentially poetic. The princes and the peers, the statesmen and the men of pleasure, staying at White Ladies did their best to teach her her power by subtlest flattery and most delicate court; they had seen nothing for years fairer than the way in which she listened to them in naïve surprise, and turned from them in graceful indifference; while the titled beauties, something jealous of her, yet sought her with courtly kindness, and wondered among themselves that Strathmore, the coldest, most heartless, and most ascetic man of his age, had so much of gentleness and consideration for a young girl to whom he was merely guardian: it could not be from her beauty, they thought, for was he not negligent of *theirs*, and of all!

To Lucille the sumptuous, glittering, brilliant life led at the Abbey seemed to her like a *conte des fées*; all had the spell of freshness for her, her light laugh rang under the arches of the grey cloisters, her youthful steps echoed down the vast area of the banqueting-hall, her eyes gazed at the Strathmore portraits, and—the shadow which lay across the threshold of White Ladies cast no shade upon this sunlit, dawning life, and the winds which sighed through the boughs of the monastic elms, and blew softly among the long grasses over her mother's grave, brought her no burden from the history of the lives to which her own owed birth. She was so happy!—life looked to her so beautiful in its still half-folded glories, like the illumined pictures of an uncut book, like the closed leaves of the passion-flower, which keeps its richest beauty shut in its core till the last. She was so happy!—for, for the first time, she was beneath the roof of Strathmore; she saw him daily, hourly; she was always in his presence, or watching for it; she could sit and listen to him while he spoke with his guests or his fellow ministers, never weary of hearing the voice which, chill in its very harmony to the ear of others, to hers was the sweetest and most mellow music that it knew. And her heart, child-like in its purity, but far beyond childhood and beyond youth, in the vivid depth of all it felt, cherished as the life of its life, her love and reverence for him to whose guardianship her father had bequeathed her. From her earliest

years she had clung with a strange affection to Strathmore; while yet so young that comprehension of his career was impossible to her, she had delightedly listened to all who would tell her of his greatness; she loved to think how much she owed to him, and how deep must have been his friendship for her father that he took this care for her. All that was powerful, generous, and grand in his character drew her to him; all that was darker was veiled from her; she thought it as stainless as it was unrivalled, and the fair, fond dreams of a luxuriant imagination had clung about him as their centre till that affection had become the religion of her life. It seemed as though the love which her father had borne to him had been transmitted to her: natures such as Strathmore's, which are indifferent to love, are not seldom those on which most love is lavished.

“What are you so absorbed in, Lucille?” asked one of the women staying there, a certain lovely leader of the fashion.

Lucille, half lying on a couch in the library, resting her head on her hand, looked up with a smile:

“I was reading ‘Indiana.’”

Lady Chessville laughed, and turned to Strathmore, who had just entered the library with the Duke of Beauvoir, his son the Marquis of Bowdon, the Prince de Volms, and Valdor.

“Lord Cecil! here is Lucille absorbed in ‘Indiana.’ Do you permit that as her guardian?”

Strathmore smiled as he approached:

"Lucille will not be harmed by Georges Sand, Lady Chessville : Rousseau or De Kock would leave no stain *there*; the soil must be fit ere impure plants will take root. Still—you are right. Where did you find that book, my dear? It is not my edition, I think."

Lucille looked at the cover.

"No; there are not your arms on it. I found it in my room; it amused me, and so I brought it down. There is a name on the title-page, though the ink is faded. Look! 'Bertie Erroll.' Who was he?"

She held the book up to him, her hand on the faded writing, her eyes raised to his, and a sharp agony struck him again like the stab of a mortal blow, for his grief for *this* sin was great and deathless.

But his smile did not change, not a muscle of his face moved, and he took the volume without even a moment's hesitation, carelessly glancing at the title-page :

"Yes, it is one of Erroll's; he was a friend of mine. Keep the book if it amuse you, Lucille."

Lucille saw no difference from his habitual manner, which, when others were with them, was always gentle but cold. Lady Chessville connected nothing with the name, for she had been a child at the time of that tragedy in the Deer Park of the Bois, and the world had long since forgotten that darker story of its successful Minister's earlier manhood. Beauvoir, a good-hearted, kindly man, whispered to Lord Bowdon as they went out:

"He shot that very fellow Erroll through the

heart years ago about a notorious woman, and now speaks of him like that! Bosom friends, too, they were! Able man, Strathmore, very able, but cold as ice and cruel as a Borgia. Don’t know what remorse is!”

So bystanders judge! Valdor alone noted, to judge differently, the singular indifference, the perfect tranquillity with which Strathmore spoke Erroll’s name and looked upon his writing: he had seen them precisely as calm, precisely as negligent an hour before sunset, when he went out with a murderer’s resolve, brutal and inflexible, in his heart; he had so seen them when the sun had sunk, and the murderer had stooped to sever the golden lock from the trailing hair of the dead man. By one of those instincts which the mind cannot trace, but which it involuntarily follows, it struck him that Strathmore had spoken thus *for the sake of Lucille*; he would not have thought it needful to have assumed such complete indifference towards Erroll’s memory merely for men who knew how Erroll met his death, and would have rather respected him more than less for some show of remembrance also. From that hour she became associated with the memory of Erroll in Valdor’s thoughts; he felt convinced that the cause of Strathmore’s care for his ward arose in some way or other from her connexion with the man whom he had slaughtered in cold blood: and Valdor was keen, hot, eager in the scent, for all concerning Lucille had interest for him, this guileless beautiful child,

reared in seclusion by the English shores of the Atlantic.

Strathmore saw this interest, saw it in Valdor, as in many others under his roof, throughout those autumnal weeks, and it woke anger in him whenever their glances fell on her, or their words made her eyes grow dark and wistful in half-shrinking, half-disdainful surprise, as they whispered subtle flatteries in her ear. Anger which was twofold: first, because they would rapidly destroy the unworn freshness and the innocence, earnest whilst it was childlike, which were beautiful to him in her; last, and more, because each might be one who would wake her heart from its rest and imperil its peace. He had sworn to make his atonement by securing her happiness at whatever cost; he had looked on hers as the life on which hung his single power of expiation. How could he secure it when once she should have been taught to place it in the hands or embark it in the love of any one of those who sought to dispel her childhood by their honeyed whispers?

Strathmore, who held that Will can work what it chooses, and who, in the arrogance of a great intellect, conceived that he could mould fate like potter's clay, felt passionate impotence as he realised that the work of his atonement might be wrested from him incomplete, and dashed to pieces before his eyes. It was here that his error had lain; his remorse was holy in its intense contrition, its sincere agony; but he did not seek its expiation in that humility and self-

doubt which a great guilt may well leave upon the proudest and most self-sustained nature : he had set it before him as he had set the ambitions of his public life, as a purpose to be effected by his own foresight and his own will, guarded by him alone from all chance of miscarriage, all touch of opposing will, all danger of human accident, as his strength of steel and his unscrupulous force bore down all that was antagonistic to him, and pioneered his road to power. Prostrate and chastened by misery, he had vowed to fulfil the trust bequeathed him an hundred-fold beyond all which that trust enjoined ; but to the fulfilment of his oath he had gone in the same spirit with which he had dealt out death and meted vengeance ; the spirit which relied on the masterly skill of his own hand to mould what form it would, and still conceived that Life would bend and bow to his haughty fiat : “ *I choose this !* ”

“ You gave me leave to hope ; but what chance of hope, sir, is there for me with all *these* ? ” said young Caryll, bitterly, one day, as he glanced at the knot of titled and famous men gathered about Lucille in the cedar drawing-room.

Strathmore had extended his invitation to the young man, true to his promise, to give him opportunity to advance his love on her affection, for he was scrupulously just, and never broke his word in private or public matters.

Strathmore smiled—that smile under which young Caryll winced as under the cut of a knife :

“ I gave you leave to hope, certainly ; it is for you to give your hope a basis. I never told you *I* deemed it well founded ; but you should know how to make it so. If you have so little of the necessary love-lore, I cannot help you ; *ce n'est pas à moi !*”

“ But—but how, when she has so many to teach her her power——?” began the youth, hesitatingly.

Strathmore raised his eyebrows :

“ ‘*How !*’ If you be such a novice in the art, it were wiser you should abandon it altogether.”

He spoke with that slight laugh which was more chill than most men’s sneer ; but, though his words had stung his nephew as the young alone can be stung by the light contempt of a man of the world, Strathmore’s disdain for him was not unmixed with a wish that his suit might prosper. If Lucille’s heart were fastened on Caryll’s love, and could be content in it and with it, her happiness might be more surely and safely secured than with those more brilliant in station, who now sought her ; and over his nephew, who would be his debtor, and whose career would be moulded and checked by him, he would have still a sway, where, if she wedded any other, he would lose his influence for her and over her life for ever. Yet the same bitterness which had arisen when his mother had first spoken of marriage for her, rose in him now, as he looked across to where she stood in the conservatories, caressing a bright-plumaged bird, and trying to lure another from the topmost boughs of an orange-tree, too absorbed in her wayward favourites to be

conscious of the glances bent upon her by the group around.

“Can they not let her alone for a few brief years, at least?” he mused, with an acrid impatience. “That bird’s wing which brushes her lips is fitter caress for her than men’s embraces. Marriage! Faugh!—it is profanity to speak of—to think of—for her!”

“Strathmore, if you are disengaged just now, give me five minutes,” said the Duke of Beauvoir, touching him on the arm at that moment.

His Grace was a heavy, cheery, generous gentleman, to whom *Mark Lane Express* panegyrics on his prize short-horns were dearer than European encomiums on his policies, and who in the Cabinet was very utterly under the lead of his subtle and astute colleague, though the reins were so excellently managed that he was wholly unconscious of his own docile obedience.

“I want to talk to you about a merely personal matter,” went on the Duke, as Strathmore led the way into the billiard-room, just then empty; “in fact, about your young ward, Mademoiselle de Vocqsal. Have you any marriage in view for her?”

“None, my dear Duke.”

“Well! Bowdon has lost his head about her,” went on his Grace, in his usual sans façon, good-humoured style, which flung dignity to the winds as humbug, and yet somehow or other never entirely lost it. “Never saw him so much in love in my life! You’ve remarked it, of course, eh? He has asked

me to-day to speak to you. In point of fact, I should be very glad to see him married myself, and I have so high an esteem for Lady Castlemere, that I should have been perfectly satisfied if I had known nothing more than that the young lady he sought had been reared under her tutelage, so I told him I would mention the matter to you this morning. I presume the alliance would have your concurrence?"

"A more brilliant one it would be impossible to find for her! You do me the highest honour in soliciting her hand for Lord Bowdon," answered Strathmore, with his suave, chill courtesy, which was never startled into surprise as it was rarely warmed to cordiality. "His proposals, then, have your full sanction? May I ask what has been said on the subject to my ward?"

"Nothing!—nothing definite, at least. She is so exceedingly young—not brought out, indeed—that Bowdon and I both concurred in seeking her hand from you first. Will you mention it to her as you think best?"

"With pleasure. We may postpone, then, any further discussion of your wishes or mine until we are aware how Mademoiselle de Vocqsal receives your most flattering proposal?"

"*How?*"

His Grace looked fairly astonished—a little amazed, moreover; it was so very new a suggestion to him that his son, the future Duke of Beauvoir could possibly be rejected!

Strathmore smiled, that suave, courtly smile which always a little worried his noble colleague :

“ My dear Beauvoir, I need not say that alliance with your House surpasses the most splendid aspirations which my ward could have indulged in for herself, or my mother and I, as her guardians for her; at the same time, I do not prejudge Lucille’s answer, since I should never seek to sway her inclination. But there is little fear, doubtless, of what that answer will be; Lord Bowdon could not woo in vain.”

His Grace’s pride and consternation were both soothed, and he passed on to speak further of his proposals in his son’s name with that hearty *au point*, straightforwardness, which in the Cabinet made so strong a contrast to the fine finesse and inscrutable reticence of one who, from his earliest years of public life, had recognised the essential art of success to lie in knowing “ how to hold truth, and—how to withhold it.”

“ I must be the first, then, to taint her mind with marriage offers!” thought Strathmore. “ Rank more brilliant could not be given her; every woman in England will envy her her lot; he is a handsome, amiable, inoffensive—fool! Such men make the kindest husbands. There will be no fear for her happiness, if—if—she love him. And yet, that soft, delicate, innocent life! Good God! it is defilement!”

The thoughts flitted, scarce shaped, through his mind; the sudden offer of the Duke’s alliance had

struck him with keen, though vague pain—the same pain, but more intense, which had smitten him when his mother had first spoken of Lucille's future. Young Caryll's love for her had been some distant thing, viewed by him with some contempt, and subject to long probation ; he had not realised it in connexion with her ; but the Duke's words had set sharply and vividly before him the inevitable certainty that, ere long, the loveliness to which so many testified would be sought and claimed in marriage, and that, once given to another, his right over the life which he alone now protected, and directed, must pass utterly and for ever from him. She might be happy in her husband's home, and in that happiness he would have no share ; looking on it, he would no longer see in the beauty of her days the symbol of his own atonement : or—she might be wretched in the union which bound her, or in the grief of a wronged womanhood, and he would be powerless to give her freedom and consolation, and must see the life he had sworn to the dead to keep unstained and unshadowed, consume hopelessly before his sight !

To the man who, high in power and arrogant in strength, had a scornful disbelief in the power of Circumstance to overthrow Resolve, the sense of the impotence of his will here was bitter as it was strange. For the moment, maddened by it, he felt tempted to exert his title as her guardian to forbid all marriage for her, all love to her ; but this, again, he was forced to surrender ; to secure her happiness, free

choice must be left her, in that which thwarted, often makes the misery of a life ; and Strathmore's nature, merciless to others, was one to the full as inflexible to himself in any ordeal self-chosen, any sacrifice self-imposed. It smote him with pain, with aversion, almost with loathing, to be the first to speak to her of what must lead her across that boundary she had told him wistfully she feared to pass, which oftentimes parts Childhood from Womanhood by a single step. He revolted from his office ; but it devolved on him as her guardian ; as such he had accepted it, and he went to fulfil it.

As he descended before dinner, he saw her upon the terrace leaning over the parapet in the warm glow of the western light, which slanted across the broad flight of steps, and fell about her where she stood; strange contrast, in the bright and aerial glow of her youth, to the grey monastic walls of the Gothic façade behind her, and the dark massed branches of the cedars above her head.

He approached her, and laid his hand gently on her hair, turned simply back from her brow in its rich silken waves :

“Where are your dreams, Lucille ?”

She looked up, and the warm light which ever came there at his presence beamed upon her face :

“I was thinking of all those who have lived and died here ; of all the histories those grey stones could speak ; of all the secrets which lie shrouded in those woods since they saw the Druidic sacrifices, and heard

the chant of the white-robed Dominicans :—the dead days seem to rise from their graves, and tell me all that is buried with them !”

She spoke only in the fanciful imagination which loved to wander in the poetic mysteries of the past, but her words now, as often, struck him with that deadliest Nemesis of crime—the doom which compels the guilty to hear reproach in every innocent speech, and feel a blow on unhealed wounds, in what, without that remembered sin, had been but gay jest or soft caress.

“ You are too imaginative, Lucille,” he said, quickly. “ Why dream of that dark past, of unholy sacrifice and insensate superstition ? The past has nothing to do with *you*; live in your own fair present, my child. Your sunny sea-shore suits you better than the monastic gloom of White Ladies.”

She lifted her bright head eagerly :

“ Oh ! I love White Ladies best.”

“ Surely ? But Silver-rest is your home ? ”

“ Yes ; but this is *yours*.”

He smiled ; all expression of her affection was dear to him, not because affection was ever necessary to him, but because hers was like the pardon and purification of his crime. Then the office which he came to execute, recurred to him ; they were alone, no living thing near save the deer which were crossing the sward in the distance, and the peacock trailing his gorgeous train over the fallen rose-leaves on the

marble pavement. But that solitude might be broken any second ; he employed it while it lasted.

“Lucille ! you may command another home from to-day, if you will.”

Her eyes turned on him with a surprised, bewildered look, while a happy smile played about her lips :

“Another home ! What do I want with one, Lord Cecil ? ”

“Many will offer one.”

The surprised wonder in her eyes deepened, she looked at him hesitatingly, yet amused still :

“I do not understand you.”

A curse rose in his throat on those who made him destroy the yet lingering childhood, and awaken thoughts which he himself would have bidden sleep for ever.

“I am not speaking in enigmas, Lucille ; I tell you merely a necessary truth,” he answered her gravely. “As your guardian I have the disposal of your future ; of that future those who love you will each seek the charge ; it is for you, not me, to decide to whom it is finally entrusted. His Grace of Beauvoir has to-day sought your hand from me for his son. What answer shall I return to Lord Bowdon ? ”

Her eyes had been fixed wistfully on him as he spoke, scarcely as if comprehending him ; at the clearness of his last words a blush, the first he had seen there, flushed her cheeks, her lashes drooped,

her lips parted, but without speech, and he fancied that she shuddered slightly.

His task revolted him, he loathed it yet more in execution than in anticipation ; but Strathmore let no trace of repugnance appear, he addressed her calmly and gravely, as befitted one who filled to her, in her eyes and the world's, her father's place :

“ I do not need to tell you, Lucille, that such an alliance is almost the highest in the country, and one of the most brilliant it would be possible to command. His father tells me that Bowden loves you as much even as the fancy of youth can wish to be loved. To exaggerate the rank of the station you would fill would be impossible, and your happiness—— ”

“ Oh hush ! hush !—it seems so strange.”

The words were spoken rapidly under her breath, and almost with an accent of terror, while the flush was hot on her cheek, and her head was drooped and slightly turned from him ; it might be the startled shyness of girlish love, the momentary agitation of a flattered pride ; he took it for these, and a pain, keen and heavy, smote him, and made his tone more cold, though as calm and even as heretofore, as he went on :

“ Nay, you must hear me, Lucille. I but repeat to you what the Duke has said, and it is no light matter to be dismissed hastily either way. I am no ambassador of a love-tale ; but I should err gravely in the place I hold towards you if I did not put fully before

you the eminence of the rank for which your hand is sought, and the splendour of the alliance into which you may now enter——”

He paused suddenly, for she turned towards him with a swift movement and that caressing grace with which as a little child upon the sea-shore she had leaned against him, thinking she had done wrong to touch a stranger's dog.

“Hush! you pain me. Why do you speak to me so? Are you tired of me, Lord Cecil?”

The colour still was warm in her face, but her eyes as they questioned his were pleading and reproachful, and there was a naïve plaintiveness in the words, and in the action, with which she turned to him, which touched him, even while they struck him with a sense of keen relief, of vivid pleasure: it would have cost him more than he had counted to surrender his right to gladden, to guide, and to control this young life; it would have been the surrender of Erroll's trust, and of his own atonement.

He drew her gently towards him with that tenderness which existed only for her, begotten of circumstance, while foreign to his nature.

“Why does it pain you, my love? Have you heard me aright? I but speak to you of a marriage for which my consent has been sought, and which is so exalted and unexceptionable a one, that as your guardian I should be deeply blameable if I did not fully set before you all it offers. I should never urge

your inclination, but I must state truly all which may await you if you accept it. Decide nothing hastily ; to-morrow you can give me your reply."

A look of aversion shadowed her face, she clung to him with that caressing reliance as natural and unrestrained now as in her childhood, and lifted her eyes in beseeching earnestness :

" Oh no ! Why ? What need ? Tell them at once that I could not—I could not ! "

A gladness which had never touched his life since Marion Vavasour destroyed it, swept over him for a moment at her words ; he loved her for the sake and in the memory of the dead ; and he rejoiced that he was not yet bidden to bestow her on her lover, to give her up from his own keeping :

" It shall be as you will, Lucille. I have no other aim save your happiness. But are you sure that you know what you refuse ; that you may not desire to speak of it further with my mother ? You are very young, and a station so brilliant—"

Something proud, pained, wistful, perplexed, which came into her eyes, again arrested him ; the delicate and spiritual nature shrank from the coarser ambitions imputed to her, the worldly bribe proffered to her :

" Why do you tell me of *that*, Lord Cecil ? "

" Because it is my duty as your guardian, *not* because I think that it would sway you. I do not. Yours is a rare nature, Lucille."

His answer reassured her, and the shadow passed

from off her face as the warm sunlight of the west fell on it, the smile upon her lips, so like her father's in its gladness and its sunny tenderness, that it smote Strathmore as on the night when she had wakened from dreaming sleep on the bosom of her dead mother.

“Then—then—whenever any others speak to you as the Duke has done, you will answer them without coming to me? You will say ‘Lucille has no love to give strangers, and needs no guardian save the one she has!’”

He smiled, moved to mingled pain and pleasure by her words :

“I cannot promise that, my child, for I fear they would not rest content with such an answer. And—Lucille—the future must dawn for you as for all, and you will find other loves than those you now know.”

She put her hand up to his lips to silence him, and her eyes grew dark and humid :

“Never! Never! If the future would differ from the present, I pray God it may not dawn. Are you weary of Lucille, Lord Cecil, that you would exile her to other care?”

“Never ask that! I wish to God my care could shield you always.”

His answer sprang from the poisoned springs of a deep and hidden remorse : she heard in it but a sure defence and promise for the future, as he stood resting his hand upon her shoulder in the evening silence, while the sun sank from sight behind the elm-woods,

and the shadows of twilight stole over the terrace, where the winding waters glistened through the gloom, white with their countless river-lilies, as on the night when Marion Vavasour had been there beside him, wooing from his lips the first words of that guilt-steeped love in which all the beauty of his manhood had been cast and wrecked.

Laughing in soft, child-like gaiety—for his words had made her very glad, and banished even from memory the momentary vague pain and fear which had fallen on her, she scarce knew why—Lucille stooped and wound her hands in the luxuriance of the late roses, which still blossomed in profusion over the steps and balustrade of the cedar-terrace, covering the white marble with their trailing leaves and scarlet petals, and filling the air with their odour. Her hands wandered among them with that delight in their beauty which was inborn with her artistic and imaginative nature, and drawing one of the richest clusters from the rest, she held them to him in their fragrance :

“ I do not wonder that the Greeks and the poets loved the roses best, and that the Easterns gave them to the nightingales as the burden of their song and the choice of their love ! How beautiful they are—the Queen of Flowers ! ”

The words, the action, the sight and scent of the roses, as she held them upward to him in the twilight, recalled, in sudden vivid agony, the memory of the woman who had stood there with him on that very

spot, with the subtle, poetic lies upon her fragrant lips, which gave the flower that she loved value and sweetness in his sight because their kiss had rested on its leaves :—it was among the roses that he had seen her in the morning-light at Vermonçaux ; it was among the roses that he had seen her in the summer-noon, when he had spared her from death only that she might live to suffer ! And the flower was accursed in his sight.

Those scarlet roses, with their heavy fragrance and their clinging dews, gave him a thrill of horror as he saw them lifted to him by the innocent hands of Lucille ; they were in his eyes the bloodstained symbol of the assassinatress, of the destroyer !

With an irrepressible impulse he seized them from her, and threw them far away, till they fell bruised and scattered on the turf below.

Her look of surprise recalled him to himself.

“Roses have a faint odour to me, my dear ; I have not your love of them,” he said, hurriedly. “Your lilies of the valley become you best, Lucille ; those roses have nothing in common with *you*, the flowers of orgie, of revel, of secrecy !”

She looked at him surprised still, for she had never seen his tranquil repose of manner broken until now at White Ladies, and it seemed to her very strange that he, the haughty and inflexible political leader, should be thus moved by the unwelcome fragrance of a few autumn roses !

Her eyes dwelt on him wonderingly, wistfully :

"Have I vexed you, Lord Cecil? You are not angry with me?"

He passed his hand softly over her hair, deeply moved in that moment by the tender and pleading words.

"No! God forbid! Act as your own heart dictates, Lucille, and you will ever act as I would have you. I rejoice that you do not risk your life in other hands than mine. Keep your beautiful youth while you may!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## THE NIGHT WHISPER OF THE PAST.

“So you have sent poor Bowdon away, Lucille. It was very cruel, and a refusal must seem so remarkably odd to him!” laughed Lady Chessville, the night after, as she came into the young girl’s dressing-room before the déshabille. The Peeress, young and omnipotent herself, was one of those women who like the beauty and grace of others.

Lucille shook her head a little disdainfully :

“It is a cruelty he will soon forget.”

“It is not so easy to ‘forget’ always, mon enfant, but you have not learnt that; you have nothing to blot out,” said the Countess. “Come, tell me, Lucille, how could Bowdon fail to please you? What was it you disliked in him? I am curious; he is accustomed to be thought perfection.”

“I did not *dislike* anything; I never thought about him at all.”

Lady Chessville laughed a silvery peal of hearty laughter :

“ Poor Bowdon ! if he could but hear that ! I must really tell the Duke of the degradation to which his beloved has come. But you are very ungrateful, my beautiful child. Can none of them move you any more ? I shall say your guardian has taught you his own coldness.”

The colour flushed into Lucille’s face, her eyes darkened and dilated, she raised her head eagerly, while the rich masses of her unbound hair shook over her shoulders to the ground :

“ ‘Cold?’ You must never use that word to my guardian. Oh ! how little you know him ! There is no one on earth so gracious, so gentle, so generous, so full of kindly thought and noble acts. There is the coldness of his world, of his years, of his ambitions, perhaps in his look and in his words, but there is no coldness in his heart. Look what he has been to me, merely because the father whom I lost was the friend of his youth. Would one cold at heart cherish such a memory so sacredly, and fulfil a trust of the dead so unweariedly ? ”

The firelight shone warmly on her upraised face, through which the soul within seemed itself to beam ; her eyes looked upward proudly and lovingly, with the bright hair brushed from her flushed brow, and her lips slightly parted with the eager words ; she might have been painted for Vivia Perpetua in her young and holy loveliness, willing to endure all things

even unto death in defence and in reverence for her Lord.

Lady Chessville looked at her and sighed: there was that in Lucille's face which vaguely touched to sadness all those who gazed on her.

"He was your father's friend?" she said, musingly.  
"I never knew that!"

"Yes; and he loved him so well!" answered Lucille, while her voice grew low and tremulous, recalling the memory of him whom Strathmore had taught her to dream of with more than a filial affection, hallowed towards the dead as it could never have been to the living. "I cannot remember him, but Lord Cecil has spoken of him to me till I think of him as dearly as though he were living now. He died in my infancy, Lord Cecil was with him at his death, and it is because they had lived as brothers that he has such goodness and tenderness for me. Do you think any man, cold at the core of his heart, could retain such a memory of one lost friend? It will show you alone that the beauty of his character to those who know it aright, equals the greatness of his career; eclipse it, it cannot do!"

"You are eloquent for your guardian, Lucille," said Lady Chessville. "What you tell me speaks very differently for Strathmore than what society says usually; we all know his intellect, his power, his statesmanship, are masterly, but we never held him anything but icily heartless with his subtle, delicate sneer, and his world-steeped egotism. I remember,

I fancy, however—I don't exactly know what—but I think I once heard that many years ago he was passionately in love with some woman who deserted or betrayed him; did you ever hear anything of it, Lucille?"

"Never!" She started a little, and a certain look of disquiet and pain shadowed the eyes which were gazing happily and dreamingly at the flashing fire-rays.

"Ah! I dare say not," said the Countess, with a little yawn of ennui. "It was a romantic, terrible story, I imagine; it was so long before my time that I never heard any particulars, but very likely it may be the reason of his utter indifference to women. I cannot possibly picture Lord Cecil Strathmore loving anything but power, or heeding anything save himself! But you will rebuke me if I say so, ma belle; and since he is so kind to you, I shall do my best to believe that there *is* a heart under that polished surface of courtly and ministerial ice."

Lucille did not seem scarcely to hear her; her eyes were fixed with their gaze of vague disquiet on the ruddy glisten of the fire-flames.

"Betrayed him—deserted him," she muttered, musingly. "Oh, surely no woman could—"

Lady Chessville looked up quickly and scanned her face, from which the warm colour had faded; and she passed her hand caressingly over Lucille's brow as she rose.

"Good night, my lovely child. Do not sit up

and think over that bygone story I was silly enough to name to you; you may be very sure that Strathmore has never suffered, and (I would stake much) has never loved, even in his early years, except, indeed, perhaps, as people—*petri du monde* as he is—do love, which is very worthlessly. I will not have you waste so much of your thoughts and tenderness on your guardian, Lucille—that cold, negligent, ambitious man, whose only passion is power!"

Lucille drew slightly away from her hand, and a faint smile came on her lips.

"You only know Lord Cecil as the world knows him, Lady Chessville; he merits from me a thousand-fold more than all the gratitude and reverence I can give him."

The Countess looked at her again in silence for a moment, then stooped to give her a light kiss, and floated from the chamber. Lucille sat where she had left her, not changing her attitude, but, with her head bent forward and her hands lying lightly on her bosom, gazed into the hot and glowing embers of the burning wood, with a vague and unknown sadness oppressing her, she knew not why.

Strathmore had told her aright that one day suffices to destroy for ever the barrier which parts childhood from womanhood; and Lucille had that day lost much of the golden radiance of childhood, which is happy in its unconsciousness and content in its present. But what had dispelled it, was not so much

the love which had been proffered to her, which, though it had startled her for the moment, had had so little hold on her thoughts, that it had been shaken off from them, leaving nothing of its significance, and having taught nothing of its knowledge ; it was rather this shadowy love of a long dead past, of which she had heard to-night, which woke in her own heart an unfamiliar pain, and made her wistfully muse on its meaning and its story.

For the first time in all her innocent and guarded life she felt an intangible disquiet and uneasiness, and, rising, she went, as was her nightly custom, to Lady Castlemere's chamber before going to rest—her own apartments had been altered by Strathmore's order, and now adjoined his mother's, in the west wing of the abbey. She was received with the affection which had encircled her only too tenderly from her infancy, and which the peeress in her aged years did truly feel to this bright and loving child, who had been given to her care by so dark a tragedy, orphaned by her son's own hand, and made desolate by his crime. Haughty still to most others, his mother was invariably gentle to Lucille ; and her hand fondly stroked now the floating silken masses of loosened hair, as she lay at her feet in the warmth of the fire-glow resting her head against her knee ; Lucille loved warmth and light like any tropic bird.

They were in strange contrast, the age and the youth—the grave and venerable patrician, bowed by

the weight of many years, while something of the fire of her superb womanhood still gleamed from her proud sunken eyes; and the young girl in all the dawning glory of her unspent life, with the grace of childhood in every pliant limb, and the unworn brightness of childhood in the bloom of her cheek and the golden light of her hair.

"You are silent to-night, Lucille?" she said, gently, at last, when some minutes had passed by.  
"Where are your thoughts?"

The colour stole into her face, and she did not lift her head from where it rested.

"I was thinking—I was thinking, Madame—of what Lady Chessville said just now."

"And what was that?"

"Madame" was the familiar title Lucille had given her when too young to pronounce her name, and Lady Castlemere had encouraged her to continue it, since it supported the foreign extraction from which all were led to attribute her birth.

"You can tell me, Madame, did—did Lord Cecil, many years ago, ever love any woman who betrayed him?"

The hand which lay on her waving tresses moved with an involuntary start. Had any been hinting to Lucille the outline of that tragedy so long, so scrupulously, so anxiously concealed from her!—had any been unfolding the first pages of that dark history, which, opened to her, would reveal to her that the hand which she loved, and which cherished her, was

the hand which had slain her father, as the pitiful among men would not have slain a brute !

But with the blood of the Strathmores in her veins, his mother had the inscrutable serenity under trial of her Norman race ; and she looked down into the girl's wistful eyes with calm surprise.

" Why do you ask, Lucille ? It is a strange question."

" But tell me, is it true ? Did he ever love any one who was faithless to him ? "

Her voice was very earnest, even to tremulousness, and in her upraised eyes there was a plaintive anxiety ; and her listener saw that entire denial would rather increase than lessen the little Lucille could as yet know of the truth.

" Long ago, my love, Strathmore loved unwisely and unhappily. But it is a matter so entirely of the past, that it is folly to recal it ; and you must never allude to it to your guardian. What was it, Lady Chessville could tell you ; she was a mere child in his early manhood."

" She told me very little. She said she knew nothing ; but she had heard of the story, and she thought it was the reason why he was now so cold. Why should she call him cold ; he is not ? "

" Not cold in your sense, my dear, but in hers. He feels deeply—here and there—as he feels for you, and for the memory of your father ; but Lady Chessville means that he has long ago left to younger men

the follies of love, and is entirely given to political life. In her sense she is right."

Lucille's head drooped again; and as the firelight flickered on her face, it wore its unwonted look of new disquiet, of brooding and unanalysed pain.

"Oh! how could any woman betray him?" she said, half aloud, with an accent in her voice it had never borne before. "How could any one forsake him and make him suffer—throw away such a treasure as his love?"

Lady Castlemere caught the intonation of the words, and stooped to look upon her face; a thought crossed her which filled her with a ghastly and horrible terror. Better, better, she felt, that Lucille should learn the truth of that fatal history, shrouded from her birth—learn it in all its hideous nakedness, its merciless and deliberate crime, and learn to shrink from the hand she loved and honoured, as the hand stained with her father's blood, than that the fear which crossed his mother's thoughts as she looked on her should ever ripen into truth!

"Lucille!" she said, almost hurriedly, "do not let your thoughts wander into buried years of which you can tell nothing, and which can be nothing to you, my child. It is sorrow wasted, to grieve for so long dead a thing as your guardian's past. All men love, some wisely, some erringly, but love he himself has long abandoned and put aside; it had a charm for him in his earlier years, but it can never now be any-

thing to him, not even a regret ; therefore waste no regret for him. In the ambitious life of a statesman, such weaknesses are quickly forgotten ; associate them with Lord Cecil no more than you would have thought to do with your father, whose place he fills."

Her words were purposely chosen ; and Lucille listened silently, her head bent, her eyes gazing at the falling embers, the warm colour in her face wavering. The vague pain still weighed upon her, and each syllable fell chilly on her, like the touch of a cold blast ; the last yet more than any.

"Lucille ! look at me," said his mother, anxiously.

The terror which had floated through her mind strengthened with that silence, and the shadows which flickered over the face she watched. Lucille raised her head with a half-broken sigh, and her fair eyes looked upwards to her gaze, guiltless, fearless, trustful, even while their natural sadness was deepened : the fear which had seized on her watcher was slaked for the time ; if it had grounds, as she prayed it might never have, she saw that Lucille, at the least, as yet knew nothing of her own secret. She bent and kissed her.

"Go to your bed now, my darling ; it is late, and you are used to early hours at Silver-rest. And, Lucille, the question you have asked of me you will not ask of others ?—it would displease your guardian."

A faint, proud smile, tender and mournful, came on Lucille's lips as she arose :

"Oh ! Madame, you are sure his name is too sacred to *me* to talk of it idly with any ! I would never have asked of Lord Cecil's past of any one save yourself."

And his mother knew, as the girl's good-night caress lingered on her brow, that Lucille spoke the truth ; that unless any remorseless hand tore down the veil which hid the past, and forced upon her sight the secret which it shrouded, her lofty and delicate nature would never imperil its own peace by restless search or curious interrogation. Yet the new and different fear which had arisen in her that night for the first time could not be banished ; and, as she sat in solitude, she shuddered at the memory with which a long and varied life supplied her—the memory of how often, baffling men's justice and men's expiation, the harvest of the past, sown by the guilty, is reaped by the guiltless, and the curse of sin lies in wait to prey on the innocent.

In her own chamber, Lucille did not at once obey the words which had bade her seek rest. She dismissed her attendant earlier than usual, and stood alone gazing into the embers of the hearth, while the little spaniel which had loved her father nestled to her bosom, and her eyes grew dark and humid in deep and dreaming thought. This cause-

less pain was on her still ; she could not have told why.

A long-drawn breath, broken as a sigh, unconsciously parted her lips as she turned at last from watching the wood-sparks fall in showers on the crimson ashes, laid the little dog down upon his cushions, and, moving to the nearest window, drew the curtains aside, and looked out at the night. It was almost a habit with her : from infancy she had loved to watch the stars shining over the face of the ocean, which had been to her a living poem, a never-ending joy, a divine mystery, a beloved friend ; here the distant sea was hidden by stretches of wood and hill, but its familiar murmurs reached her ear upon the stillness, and the stars were many in the cloudless skies. She stood looking out into the brilliant night, over the vast forests and the monastic ruins of White Ladies—those silent yet eloquent relics of a long-dead past—as the moonlight shone through shivered arch and ivy-covered aisle, on crumbling cloisters and decaying altar-stones, memorials of a religion and a race whose place now knew them no more. Below her windows ran the cedar-terrace, white and broad in the moonlight, with the roses growing over its balustrade, and covering its pavement ; and the fantastic coils and branches of their foliage caught her eyes, and brought the memory of Strathmore's action, and of Strathmore's words :

“ He called them ‘ the flowers of orgie, the flowers of secrecy ; ’ perhaps he associates them with *her*, ”

she thought. "Oh! how can they say he never suffered?—how can they know? His love must have been so strong, and his suffering as great! Who could she be, that guilty woman, who could give him misery and betrayal——"

And the dangerous thoughts, which wandered dimly and blindly towards a dark and unknown past, filled her heart with their pain and her eyes with their tears—tears rare and unfamiliar, which gathered there, but did not fall.

Then she turned away from the silvered light lying on the sward, and leaving in deeper shadow the masses of the woodland; it looked chill and mournful to her—and, kneeling down beside her bed, while the glow of the warm wood-fire gleamed on her loosened hair and on her young bowed head, Lucille prayed her nightly prayer to God, for him whom she knew only as her father's friend.

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